

PERRY RHODAN



THE WORLD'S GREATEST SPACE FICTION SERIES



THE COLUMBUS AFFAIR

K. H. Scheer

#88

Perry Rhodan

No. 88

The Columbus Affair

*A Radio Message brings the Doom – and the
Battle for Terra begins ...*

K. H. Scheer

Perry Rhodan's discovery of the Moon-stranded Arkonide spaceship had been the impetus for the political unity of Mankind and had formed the cornerstone of the Solar Imperium, the stellar empire of Terra.

Minuscule by comparison with the many other powers of the universe, the fact that this small empire exists at all or hasn't dissolved in an inferno of atomic destruction or been degraded into a colony of Arkon can be attributed to the shrewd moves of Terranians surrounding Perry Rhodan in this cosmic chess game – and to the luck that eventually comes to the most proficient . . .

However, the very fantastic streak of luck that has so far followed Rhodan in his efforts to conceal the galactic position of the Sol System now seems to be nearing its end.

Recently the Solar Imperium of Mankind has had to take a goodly number of setbacks – even aside from the emerging COLUMBUS AFFAIR . . .

But now the time has come – and the question arises as to whether or not this still-adolescent stellar empire of humankind is strong enough to withstand a direct attack . . .

The PERRY RHODAN series and characters were
created by Walter Ernsting and Karl-Herbert Scheer.

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WHEN TWO UNIVERSES MEET, IT QUITE AN AFFAIR . . .
JUST EVERYBODY IS THERE!

Perry Rhodan – The Solar Empire Administrator is forced to show his hand

Atlan – The long-time heir to the throne of Arkon becomes the power behind It!

Khrest, Reginald Bell, Allan D. Mercant and Marshal Michael Freyt – Members of Solar High command at the hour of destiny: Operation Columbus

Col. Julian Tifflor – He adds to his own legend; C.O. of the *CALIFORNIA*

Sgt. Bidge – Receives the message of the century

Maj. Raynold Abucot – who loses his sense of ‘Security’

Adm. Senekho – C.O. of 10,000 Arkon ships

Marlis Center – A cosmo-biologist who, surprisingly, interests ATLAN

Cokaze – The Springer patriarch does nothing without a price

Lt.-Col. Baldur Sikerman, Capt. Gorlat and Maj. Art Rosberg – Top members of the *DRUSUS* crew

Dr. Miguel Costara – A biologist

Lt. Nafroth – A Gazelle commander

Mrs. Nattan – Wife of the director of the General Cosmic Co.

Capt. Carl Lister – If it had to happen, ‘Bad Luck Charlie’ was the man!

WARRIORS ON THE HOME FRONT

Gen. Conrad Deringhouse – Chief of Pluto Security Task Force

Col. Poskanov – C.O. of the 16th Space Pursuit Force

Sergei Poskanov – Son of Cal. Poskanov, Cadet in Space Academy

Maj. Untcher – Chief of 4th Security Patrol Wing

Lt. Fynkus – 2nd officer, light cruiser *AUSTRIA*

Lt.-Col. Hauer – Commander of the *OSAGE*

Lt. Aluf Tehete – Leader of 586th Interceptor Group

Maj. Nako Matsuro – The *NIPPON* commander has news from ‘inside’

THE MUTANT BATTLE COMMANDOES

John Marshall – Telepath and Chief of the Mutant Corps

Pucky – The mousebeaver of many abilities

Betty Toufry and **Ishy Matsu** – Telepaths in a combined ‘mind pool’

Tako Kakuta and **Ras Tschubai** – Teleporters with Pucky on a ‘power’ play

Ivan Ivanovich Goratschin – 2 heads are better than one!

Harno – He’s a real ball but has to stay home

Capt. Marcel Rous, **Lt. Kugus** and **Sgt. Eicksen** – Assigned to Hades, which is a not so hot duty

Lt. Instedt – Com Room Duty Officer aboard the *CALIFORNIA*

Ernst Ellert – Telepath, mentolist, cosmic agent on Druufon

Onot – A Druuf scientist with a twist

. . . and the spaceships *DRUSUS*, *TITAN*, *CALIFORNIA*, *GEN. POUNDER*, *OSAGE*, *CONGO*, *AUSTRIA*, *NIPPON*, *CATTANO*, *HANNIBAL*, *BARBAROSSA*, *WELLINGTON*, *ALEXANDER* & *STAR OF TERRA*

1.

THE MESSAGE OF THE CENTURY

The incredible had happened.

In clear, uncoded text the unmistakable signature appeared on the tape. Mute, cold, inanimate – yet possibly signifying a turning point in human history . . .

Sgt. Bidge had been carefully checking his entries into the radio log for 11 May 2044. What had caught his attention was a hyperspace message designated as 76Hy11544. It had been sent out under the pulse-burst coding used by the Fleet, duly modified by the recognition coding for that particular security period. Duration: 0.1 second. According to directional beam angle its point of origin had been in space sector M-13 Hercules.

Ordinarily Bidge's task would have been taken care of at this point with regard to the message if it had not been for the fact that the automatic rectifier had added that special signature to the usual ID marks on the punched tape. Those final marks were in clear text. For this part, Sgt. Bidge did not have to wait through the tedious process of decipherment of the pulse-burst message, which contained a variable probability factor ranging over a possible 4.6 million data bits.

He caught his breath sharply when the machine rang its small bell to designate the end of the rectification cycle. On the plastic tape strip in his hands was a completely meaningless maze of dots, lines and geometrical figures compressed into a mosaic pattern. It would require a high capacity electronic brain a half hour to perform a proper data retrieval on this. It was impossible for Bidge to gather the import of the message itself by visual inspection-but he could clearly read that end signature.

He repeated it softly aloud: "IRhoAdT"

For a moment he ceased to be aware of the monotonous humming and clicking of the operating equipment Sgt Bidge was the subordinate duty officer in the crypto room of Solar Intelligence.

One glance at the clock apprised him of the fact that he had already lost valuable seconds. The code man next to him was startled when Bidge reached out suddenly and decisively hit the alarm button.

"Huh? What the . . .!"

The penetrating howl of the sirens left him speechless.

Bidge waited until the armorplate hatch slid upward automatically and the chief duty officer appeared on the threshold. The crypto room of Solar Intelligence was under Class 1 security control.

Maj. Raynold Abucot had the reputation of being a superior officer who was a stickler for regulations. He came forward with carefully calculated steps, not too fast and not too slow. His face was expressionless.

“Who activated the alarm?”

The sergeant raised his hand. “I did, sir.”

Abucot looked at him sternly. “Who is ‘I’?” he asked, unmoved.

“First Sgt. Bidge, sir, 2nd duty officer, Crypto.”

“That sounds more proper. What’s happening?”

With some irritation, Bidge reflected that the question wasn’t any too proper, either. Abucot was apparently having one of his stiff-necked days again. Bidge stood up, came to attention and reported in sharply accentuated words: “Sir, a pulse-coded message from Sector M-13 Hercules has just been received and printed out by the rectifier. It bears the personal signature symbol of the First Administrator. And sir – *it’s in clear text!*”

It would not have been necessary for Bidge to accentuate his last statement to get such a ludicrous jump of alarm out of the Major. Bidge watched him curiously but with a sudden sense of being on his guard as the latter stared at the tape, his eyes futilely trying to virtually bore through the plastic strip he held in his hands.

“That’s it, alright!” muttered Abucot, flabbergasted. He looked about him almost imploringly. “Sergeant – are you sure this isn’t some kind of sick joke?”

“I wouldn’t stick out my neck that far, sir.”

The senior duty officer swallowed audibly. Finally the Major struggled to put his famed self-composure to the test. Once more his lean, narrow face became expressionless. “Thank you very much. You may terminate the alert.”

After briefly touching the wide peak of his service cap in a hasty salute of dismissal, he strutted toward the still-open security hatch. However, before he had fully disappeared beyond it the men in the Crypto Centre noted that Abucot’s feet suddenly picked up a frantic acceleration.

Bidge looked at the clock again. Smiling a bit uncertainly, he remarked: “The Old Man came to life pretty much in a hurry, didn’t he? He was able

to play the ice-berg until he got to the door but I'll bet a month's pay that he's running through the corridors now at half the speed of sound."

"Make that about 20 km per hour," interjected another Communications man. "That ought to be about right."

"Fast enough, anyway," Bidge conceded. "Does anybody remember any other time that Perry Rhodan has beamed such a message? I mean straight across, directly, without channeling through camouflaged relay stations in deep space?"

Sgt Bidge had to wait several moments for an answer. The man sitting next to him wiped his forehead and ventured to reply. "I only know that during our special training it was always drilled into our noggins that the galactic position of the Earth was such a high-level security item that nobody could even dare think of sending a direct message to Terra."

"There you are! That was due to the danger of being traced, isn't that right? So how come the very man who put out this order has violated his own restriction in this risky manner?"

A silence fell in the deciphering room of Solar Intelligence. The service men stared at each other thoughtfully. They suddenly realized that something had happened out in the Milky Way which they were far from fathoming as yet.

From then on the Crypto crew concentrated exclusively on the fully positronic operation of the deciphering equipment, which had already swallowed up the pre-punched tape strip for decoding.

A minute later the Major called in over the intercom. He ordered an immediate transmission of the decoded text.

Bidge nodded. "In about 20 minutes, sir. It's in progress now."

"Please hurry," answered Abucot nervously. He knew very well that the operation could not go any faster.

* * *

... if you'll permit me to ask it, my dear fellow: are you sober?"

Solar Marshal Allan D. Mercant, Chief of Solar Intelligence, smiled softly. With slow deliberation he replaced a wonderfully wrought letter opener of Luurs metal on the blotter of his desk. A narrow beam of sunlight came through the high, hermetically sealed window, producing a shimmer of reflections in Mercant's straw-blond crown of hair.

His smile widened as Maj. Abucot strove to improve his already exemplary

posture.

“Sir, if you please! I’ve come as quickly as possible to give you this message personally!” He stepped forward in order to place the decoded text of the dispatch on the desk and then he stepped back quickly.

Mercant’s smooth, unwrinkled face betrayed none of the tension he secretly felt. With seeming indifference he picked up the sheet of foil and began to read. Finally he looked up. If Abucot had expected to be more clearly informed as to the meaning of the message, he was immeasurably disappointed.

Mercant spoke succinctly. “I see that you’ve had the strength of the alien transmitter calculated, using your receiver sensors. Are you sure your mathematicians haven’t let some kind of error creep into this?”

“Out of the question, sir!” the Major asserted. “That station is operating with a broadcast power of at least 50 million kilowatts on the hypercom bands. I know of only one planet that could possess such a gigantic installation.”

“Which is . . .”

“Arkon 3, sir!”

Mercant nodded thoughtfully. His lean, sensitive fingers still held the foil sheet in front of him. “Thank you very much, Major. You may go now.”

Disconcertedly, Abucot walked past the two robot guards, entered the security lock and disappeared.

Only when the red signal light indicated the closure of the outer gate did the Security Chief venture to move. His right index finger flipped a switch labelled Fleet High Command. On the big viewscreen of the secret closed circuit the plastic face of a robot appeared, wearing a stereotyped smile.

“Marshal Freyt, quickly,” said Mercant. His voice sounded loud and hurried. “Class 1 priority.”

“The Marshal will be notified, sir. Kindly wait a moment.”

Mercant had to wait two minutes until Freyt’s lean, expressive countenance appeared on the screen. He was breathing heavily. Apparently he had sprinted the last few yards. The Security Chief allowed the other a moment to catch his breath. They had known each other too long by now to waste such moments on polite amenities.

Without preamble Mercant said: “Freyt, we have a hypercom message from Perry Rhodan. Are you alone?”

Freyt nodded without saying a word.

“OK, then prepare yourself for the biggest shocker of the past 50 years. Rhodan has broken all communications restrictions and made a direct beam transmission from Arkon to Earth. The trace and measurement data are not in error. There’s only one transmitter with 50 million kilowatts of output and that’s on the war planet of the Greater Imperium.”

Marshal Freyt, the Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Solar Space Fleet, breathed even more heavily than before. “You mean he radioed us directly without using an advance cruiser station as a relay? If that message has been traced to us we’ll be smack in the pits of hell!”

“There is such a possibility but he’s made allowances for that. Conditions have changed overnight.” Suddenly Mercant’s voice took on a note of celebration. “Freyt, the ruling robot Brain of Arkon has been conquered! Our strenuously prepared commando mission has succeeded. As an Arkonide who has survived the degeneration of his people, Atlan has been recognized by the actual security circuits of the Brain – and by that I mean he’s been recognized as the direct descendant of a famous emperor of the House of Gonozal. All of which gives rise to a very momentous situation. From today forward there’ll be some changes in our galactic policy.”

“Is that what the Chief says?” Freyt broke in excitedly.

“Yes, quite unequivocally. I’ll send the decoded text to your headquarters by courier. Rhodan is presently with his commando troops on Arkon 3. Atlan has taken over the power but it’s still made to look from the outside as though the giant robot were still in the saddle. That way he can conceal himself behind the machine, which was known to be merciless, and he’s able to make clever use of its authority. I go along with that myself. If it got out that a living Arkonide has taken the Regent’s place there’d be some heavy unrest in the colonial areas of the Greater Imperium. Rhodan informs us that the situation is under control. The only remaining functions of the Brain that are independent are connected with questions of administration and support. Important decisions are handled by Admiral Atlan, whom we have to consider from now on as the Arkon ruler and Imperator.”

After intensive reflection, the Marshal said: it’s a surprising situation, alright. Are you aware of the fact that Atlan knows the Earth’s location better than you or I?”

Allan D. Mercant again revealed his famous smile. “Only too well! If he goes sour on us it will only take a single order from him to send a giant fleet against the Earth. Perry is weighing such possibilities. In the dispatch you are instructed to send the Fleet flagship *DRUSUS* to Arkon at once. In the same message, Lt.-Col. Sikerman has been promoted to full colonel. He

is to command the *DRUSUS*. He has orders to fly to the planet Zalit. There he will take on board the commando troops that were left behind – scientists, technicians and mutants. Then he will go directly to Arkon 3. That about covers the contents of the message.”

“Pretty scanty contents, I’d say, in view of such a revolutionizing state of affairs,” the Fleet Commander fretted gravely.

“It’s plenty for *me*. I see some pretty cloudy times ahead, Freyt. The future of Mankind depends upon the goodwill of an Arkonide by the name of Atlan. After he’s taken over the robot Brain, all doors will be open to him. Basically I don’t doubt his friendship for us. But since I’m no alien race psychologist I can’t predict how this sudden acquisition of super power will sit with him. Just prepare yourself for anything and keep the Fleet on standby alert. Send Col. Sikerman to me before he takes off. I’d like to give him some detailed information about the Druufs’ unsuccessful invasion. It will be of interest to Rhodan that these insect offsprings of an alien universe succeeded in setting up a transmitter base in the U.S. state of Wyoming. Or better yet, wait! I’ll come to your place. Keep Sikerman on hand. See you!”

Mercant cut off the connection. For a moment he sat motionlessly behind his large desk. The light of the sinking sun was reflected from the keys of the switchboard installation.

When the Security Chief got to his feet he had an unconscious awareness of how old he was. The bio cell shower he had received on the planet Wanderer would soon have to be renewed if the cellular deterioration of his synthetically reactivated body was not to take him by surprise.

Mercant walked slowly past the saluting robot guards. In his hand he clutched the plastic sheet that contained the overwhelming news.

The robot Regent of Arkon had been partially shut down and reprogrammed! Mercant knew that this meant the dawn of a new era.

* * *

Col. Baldur Sikerman took the highly classified secret documents and handed them over to his personal robot bodyguard. The briefing in the Fleet headquarters was at an end. There were no further questions.

“I wish you safe journey,” said Marshal Freyt. “Keep your eyes open and in spite of everything you should continue to avoid any action that could lead to a discovery of the Earth. In outer space there are plenty of intelligences who have good tracking devices. Make your transitions under protection of

your hyper-shock dampers and remain extremely discreet and uncommunicative. Presumably you will be given a friendly reception, especially on Zalit. Take our people on board there and then fly the remaining a light-years to Arkon. If in that area you are attacked in spite of our hopeful expectations, pull back at once. In the latter case, Rhodan will have to find another way. Advise the Chief that everything here is in order.”

“Including the matter of the Druuf station in Wyoming,” interjected Mercant

“Yes, report that verbally to Rhodan. Then he’ll decide whether Atlan should be informed about it or not.”

Freyt looked at his watch. “It’s time. Take it easy with those hypertransitions. We are quite interested in seeing you arrive all in one piece in star cluster M-13. And . . .” Freyt smiled suddenly “. . . may those shoulder trimmings continue to expand, *Colonel Sikerman!*”

The superbattleship *DRUSUS*, the most modern of heavy class warships in the Solar Fleet, took off on 12 May 2044 at hours 05:13.

The spaceport of Terrania was flooded in the brilliant light of the impulse-engines opened at full thrust. Before its deep-throated thunder could startle people out of their sleep in the nearby capital of the Solar Empire, the spherical giant, measuring almost a mile in diameter, had already reached outer space, where Sikerman set course for transition under an acceleration of 500 km/sec per second. He had received clearance for making his first hyperjump from within the Solar System itself.

* * *

Col. Poskanov received the first tracking report from Maj. Untcher, chief of the 4th Security Patrol Wing. A massive figure of a man who was known as an outstanding space tactician, Poskanov functioned as commanding officer of the 16th Space Pursuit Force in the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, Surveillance Zone 1214A3746.

His flagship, the battle cruiser *OSAGE*, picked up Untcher’s pulse-coded message just as the announced flight of the *DRUSUS* was bringing the latter vessel close to the speed of light.

Being a logical thinker, Poskanov issued a general command for his ships to switch all available power into a hyper-phase operation of their defense screens and for the time being to avoid any changes of course. In all units of cruiser formation 16, every thrust engine went into an idling mode. Their

gleaming spherical hulls were inclosed by invisible screens of energy. Thus they were well-protected when the gigantic *DRUSUS* went into its first transition close to the orbit of Mars.

Although all hypersensors had been secured, on board almost all vessels there was a breakdown of their hyper-shock absorbers. Poskanov felt the *OSAGE* shudder in every joint of its 500 meter hull. During such major transitions the 'space quake' generated in the fixed 4-dimensional continuum was like a shockwave of unimaginable magnitude.

As the effects of this ebbed away the commanders of smaller vessels reported damages to outer compartments as well as to internal installations. Four Gazelles, which were fast auxiliary craft attached to light cruisers of the State class, requested permission to turn in to repair docks for overhaul. Col. Poskanov issued the necessary authorizations. Auxiliary unit G-275 announced that its thermal equalizer screens were out of order.

Poskanov decided to have the Gazelles picked up by the fast cruiser *CONGO* and taken to the overhaul ship yards at the Moon Base. As he was transmitting the necessary instructions to the flagship's Com Central, a high-priority pulse-coded dispatch came in from Solar Fleet High Command. The deciphering process took 36 minutes.

Meanwhile the *CONGO*'s commander was sweating out a difficult course adjustment, getting ready to use his magnetic tractor beams in an attempt to capture the damaged auxiliary craft, which was racing through space in free fall.

Two minutes before the actual recovery, Col. Poskanov received the decoded text of the message. After reading it, his first precautionary act was to contact the *CONGO*. The cruiser's skipper was disgruntled, after such intricate approach maneuvers, to receive orders to break off the rescue at once and return at top speed to his regularly assigned interceptor sector.

Lt. Nafroth, commander of the damaged Gazelle, watched with increasing amazement as the echo blip rapidly diminished in the 3-D screen of his matter detector, which operated faster than light. The *CONGO* disappeared so swiftly that it could hardly be traced by the tracking beams.

Ten seconds later the radio receiver came to life. The formation chief was on the telecom. Nafroth was instructed to let his small ship continue to drift, except that he was to avoid any collisions with cosmic debris.

Since the new Moon Base of the Fleet was closer at this time than Mars, which was on the other side of the sun, it sent out a fast salvage and recovery tender. The Gazelle's rate of drift was about 10% SPEOL so it

took the tender 7 hours to reach it and pull it into its vast cargo locks.

Where Lt. Nafroth was concerned, this took care of the situation. He could not suspect that the dangerously close hypertransition of the *DRUSUS* presaged an event in which his was only a very minor role.

By the time the tender began its return flight, Col. Poskanov had already assembled the 16th Space Pursuit Force within Sector 12-14A. At a minimal velocity the ships drifted in free fall through interplanetary space. Poskanov tied in a remote-controlled briefing session over the formation's videophone network, which operated at normal light-speed. Thus any danger of intercepting their voice-video traffic was minimized, especially since the flagship's transmitter was only putting out 250 watts of power.

The individual commanders had all gone into their respective Communications rooms for the occasion and Poskanov was visible to all of them simultaneously on the viewscreens.

"Gentlemen, effective immediately we are in a war-time combat readiness mode of operation," he announced in his typically clipped tones. "Events have occurred in star cluster M-13 which appear to make possible an imminent discovery of the Earth. You will receive further information when I have more details at my disposal. Meanwhile I have received instructions to fully equip and provision this surveillance and pursuit force accordingly, and to beef up all crews to regulation strength, after which we are to move out and join the Pluto Security Task Force under General Deringhouse. That means we will vacate all previously assigned picket stations in this area. We will fly in closed formation to the Ganymede base where we'll pick up water, provisions, spare parts and equipment in accordance with Operation Columbus. Advise your crews that their last spot for sending out mail must be at Ganymede. All currently scheduled leaves are cancelled. Although censorship of outgoing mail will not be imposed, you will advise your men that our further movements are not to be imparted to anyone. Thank you, that is all for the time being. Cut off now and switch to your data link tie-ins with the flagship. I will pilot us en route."

The viewscreens darkened. All commanders returned pensively to their respective Control Centrals.

Poskanov looked around in the circle of his staff officers. The *OSAGE* was already picking up speed. The formation chief listened for a moment to the mighty roar of the engines before he spoke again, seemingly lost in thought: "There's an old Russian proverb that says a bear will keep on licking up honey until the bees fly down his throat. I'm thinking maybe

Mankind is feeling those first stings! If we are discovered it'll be a matter of life and death. Unfortunately in our case we're not going to be dealing with honey bees but with countless battleships from the depths of space. It will get a little warm for us, gentlemen!"

Poskanov nodded to the Commander of the *OSAGE*. With his massive shoulders bent slightly forward, he walked ponderously over to his command seat. Before him glowed the giant panob screens.

The aspect of the outer void was the same as ever. Billions of stars gleamed in the black emptiness. Many of those stars possessed planets and one day an alien fleet would rise up from some of those solar satellites. And that would be it!

Poskanov decided to write a letter to his wife. Yes, and also one to Sergei, who was just about to enter into his final exams at the Academy. The requirements were hard and Sergei was weak in cosmic colonization theory. Perhaps he could make up for it by getting some outstanding marks in other subjects – perhaps! No cadet in the Space Academy of Terrania was allowed more than 5 minus points. Poskanov wondered if he would ever greet his son in an officer's uniform of the Fleet.

With a sigh he got up from the deep-cushioned revolving seat. He had no more patience for sitting still.

"You'll find me in my cabin," he said to the battle cruiser's First Officer. "Any detailed dispatches are to be brought to me at once."

2.

COSMIC FRIEND & COSMIC FOE

“I’d like to move out of here, with your permission! Perhaps in case of attack these deep subterranean cities of yours are very practical but they are too stifling and depressing for my taste. The *OSAGE* landed over 30 minutes ago. what we are still waiting for?”

Perry Rhodan, First Administrator of the Solar Empire, bent his head back in an attempt to take in the entirety of the supersized viewscreen. He wasn’t quite able to because he stood too close to its oval-shaped surface.

The 3-D image of the man on the screen was perfect Rhodan had a sense of actually seeing Admiral Atlan, sitting there before him. Also the Arkonide’s voice was transmitted with high fidelity by hidden 3-D audio units.

For a moment the two men gazed directly into each other’s eyes. The Arkonide had a broad and muscular build, appearing to be considerably more powerful than Rhodan, whose tall, lean figure hardly betrayed his physical strength.

Atlan smiled scornfully.

Rhodan noted it with displeasure. He stared up involuntarily at the smiling Arkonide whose albino-like reddish eyes were clearly visible.

“I asked you a question!”

The loudspeakers boomed forth. “Yes, I know.” By the tone of his voice it was obvious that Atlan was fully aware of how critical his relationship with Rhodan had become at this moment.

“And . . .?”

“You seem to take me for a monster who’s ready to bite your head off, Barbarian! Why do you have to ask? If you wish to move into your flagship, by all means do it. You are not my prisoner.”

Rhodan ignored the reprimand. He gazed searchingly at the transmitted image of the Arkonide who had become the key figure of the galaxy after the demise of the omnipotent-seeming robot Regent. Outside of a very few who knew the truth, no one suspected that the rapid stream of radio commands issuing from the giant antennas of the war planet were not being given by a soulless mechanical *TITAN* but rather by a relatively immortal

Arkonide of royal extraction.

Atlan had been shrewd enough not to reveal the fact that the mechanical Regent had been conquered. After a daring and perilous mission, at the last critical peak of emergency Atlan had been recognized by the failsafe portion of the Brain – that is, as an Arkonide whose mental qualities were still unimpaired and active. Only a few days ago he had finally assumed the absolute authority in place of the Regent.

This authority and power were based on the knowledge of a robot whose countless circuits covered an area of some 10,000 square kilometers. The history of the Arkonide Empire was old, in fact ancient, so that it embraced a tremendous scope of factual information. Since the giant machine contained all this in its tremendous data banks, there was nothing that it did not know.

As a former admiral of the Greater Imperium and nephew of Emperor Gonozal VII who had ruled 10,000 years ago, Atlan had taken advantage of this vast storehouse in order to fortify his position. His decisions were made under cover of anonymity. Now as before, the many colonial races within the sphere of influence of the Greater Imperium still thought they were under the dictatorship of a merciless robot machine.

Rhodan vividly recalled the events of the past few weeks—the landing on Zalit, the masquerade of his combat commandoes under their native disguises, the futile attack of his mutants against the giant defense screen of the robot Brain, and finally the crisis of beginning defeat which was only changed to victory by the intervention of the secret failsafe portion of the Brain, the existence of which had been suspected by Atlan.

“Have you lost your tongue, friend?”

Rhodan came back to himself with a nervous start. He looked uncertainly about him in the small, high-security chamber. It was located outside of the mysterious energy screen that they had underestimated with such near fatal consequences. Only Rhodan was permitted to enter here. His companions waited for him beyond a locked, armorplated gate that was guarded by stationary robot weapons.

The hexagonal-shaped room had formerly been used by the scientists from the Supreme Council of Arkon so that they could be undisturbed during their conversations and interrogation sessions with the robot Regent which they themselves had created.

Atlan’s lean, expressive face now filled the great screen as the Terranian calmly answered him: “Before I lose my powers of speech this world will

go down in ruins. Atlan, two days ago I requested a ratification of the alliance and mutual assistance pact which my experts have prepared. Since when have you undervalued the human race?"

"I don't any more – not since they have been able, under your leadership, to grasp the scientific and technological knowledge of my venerable race and turn it to their own purposes. You must remember that I knew your forefathers when they . . ."

". . . were still in caves and throwing stones at each other," said Rhodan, completing the statement. There was no bitterness in his voice.

Atlan smiled again. "Oh, have I mentioned that before?"

"About a thousand times."

"Then I apologize."

"What about the treaty of alliance between the Arkonides and the Solar Empire?"

"By that pompous and high-sounding name you are probably referring to that tiny little star of yours, whose 10 planets combined would not fill enough volume to even make one single major class heavenly body?"

"Exactly!" confirmed Rhodan, undisturbed.

Atlan laughed softly. Moments before a very serious mood of disagreement had hung on the air but now the tension between the two men faded away.

"Friend, you ought to consider my situation. Here I'm sitting in the truly gigantic switching and circuit rooms of such a miracle of technological achievement that I can't quite grasp it all myself. At the time the Robot was built I had been considered to be dead for several thousands of years. Terra time. I'm not inclined to ratify any treaties when I don't even know if I can keep you in line. You are urging me to sanction an agreement which is exclusively for the sake of *your own* security and the text of which is quite typical of you humans. However fine-sounding and carefully written, what it's saying is that you want a guarantee for the safety of the Earth."

"Is that too much to ask for? Until now the location of Terra was considered to be a secret. You are the only living extraterrestrial who has knowledge of it."

"And so? Is that a reason for suddenly mistrusting me? Or do you actually think that all my thoughts and aspirations are going to be devoted to destroying you little barbarians? Perry, come to your senses. If I had wanted to betray you, in the past few years I had sufficient means and opportunity to do so. One quick radio message would have been enough to

bring Arkon's fleet of robots into the Solar System. Isn't your think-tank functioning any more? I can't sign this agreement. My position here is still unsecured. I'm operating under the guise of the Regent right now only to give the necessary impact to my orders. If I were to come out into the open as Emperor Atlan, in a few days we'd be faced with a terrible revolution. How big do you think the Arkonide Empire actually is? Do you know the magnitude that's involved? How many alien intelligences and descendants of earlier Arkonide colonists are represented here?"

"How can I sign an agreement in their name when they know nothing of my existence? Or are you asking me to be a cheat and swindler when I have only just returned to my home world?"

"You could sign the treaty of alliance in the name of the robot Regent."

"You foxy barbarian!" said Atlan coldly. His eyes flashed with anger. "You Earthlings were always like that and you're no better – even when the well-being of your very race is at stake."

"I don't consider that to be improper," replied Rhodan.

Atlan burst out with an irritable laugh. He adjusted the image so that his face grew smaller and a part of his torso became visible. He still wore the uniform with the Arkonide insignia of a fleet admiral. It had been fashioned according to his wishes back on Earth.

"How can I answer that! For you it's not an impropriety whereas to my way of thinking it is. It would be sufficient for you if I were to just go ahead with this great deception. If I were to follow my conscience, this very day I would have the robot Brain proclaim me as the rightful ruler. But I refrain from it because I'm considering the welfare of many people. I have to proceed with extra caution. So you must content yourself with my promise that I will neither betray nor attack the Earth. What the devil – is it that hard to believe me?"

Rhodan cleared his throat. "Well, that sounded very un-Arkonide," he said drily.

"After devoting some thousand of years to teaching wild barbarians a few manners and a smattering of knowledge, it's quite possible, you know, to pick up a few of your native expressions," retorted Atlan but his tone was markedly friendly.

Rhodan closed his eyes. Atlan could be very sarcastic. The Arkonide's low laughter pulled him back out of his thoughts. "OK – it's a deal," he said slowly. "So you're not signing. What's going to guarantee that your new power isn't going to go to your head? You know in your mind that Terra is

a potential danger.”

“Oh yes, so dangerous, in fact, that you have to sneak around and just duck your heads out here and there from the darkness. That’s a strange tactic for such a formidable power.”

“It’s a measure of self-preservation. What I can offer you is what you no longer possess: outstanding specialists and trained men for your inadequately-manned spaceships. Right now I am able to move 10 million well-trained troops. Together we can put down any rebellions. That includes the Druuf conflict near the overlap zone. I’ll give you the personnel and you supply the necessary ships.”

“Agreed, but without a treaty. I’m not signing anything with a name that nobody knows but you. One day when I can emerge publicly you will have your ratified agreement of alliance. Is there anything else on your mind?”

Rhodan sensed that it was time to break off the negotiations.

“Nothing else?” said Atlan. “Good! Then move yourself and your men into the *DRUSUS*. Are you going to leave Arkon?”

“Only when the treaty has been signed.”

“You’re as stubborn as an Earth mule,” said Atlan. “You’ll never learn. Oh, and that reminds me . . .”

Rhodan looked up again at the giant viewscreen. Atlan’s last sentence had peculiar overtones.

“This mouselike creature named Pucky. I want you to straighten him out and tell him in the future to abstain from his stupid little tricks.”

“What?!” Rhodan was nonplussed. “But Pucky is with the crew we left on Zalit. We picked them up but they’ve only just landed 30 minutes ago. What do you mean?”

“The little scoundrel had no sooner arrived than he attempted to use his teleporting faculties for breaking through the robot Brain’s energy shield. Apparently this unearthly upstart thinks his capabilities are boundlessly beyond those of your human mutants. Naturally when he made his jump he was intercepted by the Brain’s ultra-dimensional field matrix. The interlocked honeycomb of force shot him right back and in an extremely painful manner. I knew about it from the automatic warning system. So take care that in the future such playfulness is kept under control. I’ve made it sufficiently clear to you and your men that the failsafe security section that was built by my forefathers will not tolerate any penetration into the area of the robot Brain by alien life forms. The programming is

built in and I can't change it. Do we understand each other, Barbarian?"

These last words sounded hard and cold. Rhodan suspected that he had reached the limits of Atlan's patience and consideration. He nodded silently but in a few moments added: "That's something else I don't like. You'd think we'd at least get permission to take a look at this technological miracle machine."

A swift movement of Atlan's head brought a bright flash to his whitish-blond hair. It seemed as though his red-golden eyes gleamed a warning. "Perry, you are intelligent enough to assess my words very well. I am telling you once more that I cannot alter the security circuits. My ancestors knew what they were doing when they built in these protections for the indispensable robot Brain. Besides, where that's concerned I do *not* trust you! You might 'just happen' to bring along a microbomb and set it off in the installation somewhere. I know you a bit too well, Terranian! So you stay in your sphere and I'll stay in mine. After the Regent portion of the Brain was phased out, it became a harmless automaton but it still retained unique capabilities. Before I would allow it to be destroyed I'd sooner annihilate you along with your whole Solar System. If one thinks in terms of the galaxy – which I presume to rule! – I'd consider the Empire with its more than 50,000 colonized worlds considerably more important than your little Earth. So beware of ever attacking the machine. In such a case all my pledges to you would become void. Is that clear to you, Perry Rhodan?"

"Oh quite clear. Thanks a lot."

"You can keep your sarcasm. Excuse me now, I have things to attend to. A new major attack is starting on the Druuf front."

Atlan raised his hand in a parting signal. The glowing viewscreen paled to an imageless raster. Behind Rhodan the thick armored doors glided upward. Bright light flooded into the hexagonal chamber.

He walked out in a state of turmoil. Atlan's final words had gotten to him. In spite of the Admiral's long time on Earth there was no more denying that he had once more become a major political figure in the galaxy – and he played his politics accordingly. Rhodan soberly admonished himself to keep his head about him. With reason and tolerance, he thought, nothing would ever happen.

With this resolution in mind, he entered the outer foyer.

Reginald Bell, his second in command, sat tensely on the edge of a chair and watched the First Administrator of the Solar System as he approached. Rhodan came to a stop directly in front of him and looked at his watch. He

said nothing.

When the silence became unbearable, Bell contented himself with a single, half-mumbled sentence. "Judging by your face I'd say Your Highnesses didn't see eye to eye."

Rhodan did not answer immediately. Still immersed in thought, he looked once more at the armorplated airlock doors of the interrogation chamber, which had closed behind him again. "It was to be expected. If I were in his shoes I wouldn't have been sold on the arguments, either. From a purely strategic point of view the treaty doesn't make sense, anyway. Who would ever keep him from striking out against us at any time he pleased, in spite of that piece of paper? So I'm a foxy barbarian, am I? Hm-m-m . . ."

Bell laughed knowingly. "He knows us too well, doesn't he?"

"Definitely! But that's also my one remaining hope. He should know very well by now that we're on his side. Under Arkon's dominance alone the Greater Imperium is short of intelligent and decisive brains. The degeneration of the present inhabitants of Arkon is so widespread that you're not going to change them much over night. The best thing Atlan can do is look to the next unborn generation, provided he starts an educational program that will protect them from lethargy, corruptions and idiotic philosophies. In about 60 years maybe he could manage to get the Arkonide Empire back on its feet again. But by that time we will have seen a few changes ourselves."

Bell got to his feet. He and Rhodan were the last two Terranians in the giant subterranean city near the robot Brain. The wide, cathedral-like halls swarmed with aliens. Most of them consisted of the troops that had been conscripted on the colonial planet Zalit and were waiting down here for embarkation. The two men were not accosted by anyone as they moved rapidly toward the nearest antigrav lift. Even the numerous robot guards allowed them to pass unhindered.

"How times have changed!" said Bell ironically. "Only a few days ago they would have burned us to ashes if we had even shown our noses around here. Atlan's reign is getting off to a pretty good start I'd say."

A Zalite space officer stared in amazement at the strange uniforms of the Terranians. He didn't know what to make of their rank insignia. He decided that to be on the safe side he would give them a proper salute.

As Rhodan acknowledged it he thought back to the difficult days of their commando push when he had been forced to wear the red-skinned disguise of a Zalite inhabitant. It had been the only way to get to the fleet

mobilization and munitions planet all in one piece.

Just before they reached the lift, Bell inquired almost indifferently: "You come down off the ceiling yet? I mean – are you calmed down?"

Rhodan slackened his pace. Finally he came to a stop and slowly turned to look at Bell, who was smiling like a sphinx. "What's wrong?"

Bell squinted up at the artificial nuclear sunball that moved along its simulated course. The conversations of the crowd of Zalites around them became a dull, heavy roar in their ears.

"What is wrong?" Rhodan repeated, more sharply than he intended.

Bell wiped sweat from his brow. "Getting too warm again down in this cave," he observed after slightly clearing his throat. "OK, so I'll tell you! Perry, we can't wait any longer for that treaty. Sikerman brought us some top secret news that isn't any too heartwarming. They've found out the Druufs were able to build a transmitter base on Terra." As Rhodan stared at him aghast and searched for words, he waved a hand. "Don't get excited, it's been taken care of. The Druufs were discovered by a former collaborator with Intelligence and were put out of business. It's been established that by some stupid accident the monsters got hold of our transmitter frequency. Probably had something to do with our supplies for the Moon Base. They calculated the 5-D effects and infiltrated over our hyper-frequency. That's not saying by any means that they are really aware of the Earth's location. But anyway our preliminary calculations show that there would be a considerable difference between a direct flight approach and an extra-dimensional transmitter jump."

Rhodan had by now collected himself. His face was expressionless. "Intelligence made a counterattack?"

"Thanks to the undercover man – I've forgotten his name. A few traitors came within an ace of fixing them up with an exit base. A so-called group of conspirators was formed which was supposed to serve as backup for the invasion. Allan D. Mercant is afraid of complications."

"That's all I needed," said Rhodan. "while I'm sweating it out here with Atlan, we have a surprise raid at home. Did Sikerman bring the full particulars?"

"Everything that Mercant was able to find out."

"What's the prognosis? Have the probability factors been worked out positronically?"

"Up to a point. He didn't have any more time. Our radio dispatch arrived in

the meantime and Mercant decided to use Sikerman as a courier. Hey, what the – ?!”

Bell got into motion to follow his companion, who had suddenly started to sprint. Panting, he reached the antigrav lift, jumped into the barely visible force field and shoved off. The two of them drifted weightlessly upward. They reached the exit near the surface dome that they had half destroyed a few days previously during their desperate battle of retreat from the depths of Arkon. A work detail of robots was busy repairing the big dock elevator. The bright white glare of Arkon sunlight greeted them. Rhodan jumped into the waiting hover glider and shouted a hasty instruction to the robot driver.

The flagship of the Solar Fleet had landed 3 kilometers away, which was still comparatively close to the vast defense screen. The *DRUSUS* was a giant but it was relatively inconspicuous here among 50 equal-sized battle-ships of the Arkonide Home Fleet.

Rhodan reached the lower manlock of the 1500-meter giant sphere just as a squadron of fast battle cruisers took off a few kilometers away and thundered into the cloudless sky. The resulting shockwaves were intercepted by the fully automatic repulsion fields and their energy was absorbed. On Arkon 3 nothing happened without the systematic intervention of the greatest robot Brain in the Milky Way.

Rhodan followed the swiftly diminishing ships with an uneasy gaze. Only a few days previously they had come off of the tireless assembly lines and now they were off on their test flights.

“I’d feel a lot better if we had a production capacity like that,” said Rhodan. “Where is Sikerman?”

The tall, broad-shouldered figure of the commander appeared in the lock. His greeting was restrained.

While still in the airlock, Rhodan remarked: “So our friends from the second time-plane cooked up a little surprise for us, did they? I want to see the particulars on that immediately. How was your trip?”

“Thank you, sir, excellent. I flew in full fighting trim when I entered the Voga System but we didn’t run into any trouble. Our people were able to come on board without any hesitation. I was only there two hours before I took off again. I also got through the outer fortress ring of the Arkon System without any interference. Not even the usual escort ships showed up. Then we were brought in by the Regent’s remote controls and landed on this spaceport.”

“Atlan kept his word,” Bell confirmed thoughtfully. “Do you think we’re judging him unfairly?”

“We’ll soon find out,” remarked Rhodan. “Sikerman, can you imagine that the Druufs *won’t* find the Earth? Just consider that these intelligences succeeded in setting up a transmitter contact apparently without a hitch. They have a high grade of science. For example, do you think we’d be able, with the help of hypermath components, to calculate a stable 4-dimensional reference point with a maximum uncertainty coefficient of plus or minus 0.5%? Could we do that?”

The scientists of the great flagship who had hurried down for the reception now stood in the background inside the large airlock. They gazed in silence at the lean, grey-eyed man in the plain uniform. Sikerman’s husky frame blocked the forward pressure hatch, together with the guard robots that were stationed there. It was as though he wanted to protect the ship against any alien intrusion.

“Sir, very probably we could do that!”

Rhodan’s smile was impersonal. “Then the others could do it too,” he said quietly. “Sikerman, get the ship ready for emergency takeoff. Where are the documents?”

“In the Control Central, sir.”

Within 10 minutes Rhodan had gone through the reports. While the exhausted men of the battle commando unit were being assigned to quarters and a buzz of conversation between them and the crew members of the superbattleship began, Rhodan put in a request for an Arkonide courier.

30 minutes after Rhodan’s arrival on board the *DRUSUS* a heavily armed robot detail appeared at the ground airlock. Simultaneously Atlan came through the Regent’s special waveband. “Problems, my friend? I was advised of your request. What is wrong?”

Rhodan came closer to the small viewscreen. “I’m sorry to have to disturb you again. But Sikerman has . . . Do you know Sikerman?”

“Naturally.”

“He’s brought me some very serious news. The Druufs have found Terra . . .”

“What . . .?”

“So far only through a transmitter base. My people didn’t have time to evaluate the basic data they obtained. I wonder if you could do that for me. I need a probability analysis.”

Atlan needed only a few moments to grasp the situation. Forty-five minutes after Rhodan's arrival on board the *DRUSUS*, the robot courier detail departed with input data. After it disappeared through the narrow opening in the defense screen, the period of waiting began within the superbattleship.

No full-scale discussions came up during that time. It was Rhodan's first opportunity to greet the members of his second unit team who had been picked up on Zalit. The mutant gave him a report on the false Admiral's startling sudden demise. Pucky, whose experiment with the mysterious honeycomb field of the robot's screen had misfired, was in the ship's hospital. He was still unconscious.

Capt. Hubert Gorlat had been playing with the idea of penetrating the Brain's screen with the help of the teletransmitter but decided not to bother Rhodan with such a suggestion. In a disgruntled mood he told the transmitter crew to shut down the equipment, which had been in operation readiness. His better judgment indicated that it might be out of place to harass an ally.

So far Atlan's actions had been beyond criticism. Arkon stood open to the human race.

Meanwhile Maj. Art Rosberg, the transmitter specialist of the Solar Fleet, brooded over the Druuf data from Intelligence. Mercant's original documents were now in Atlan's possession.

"Is this what all the excitement's about?" asked Rosberg in sudden dismay. "Do they think the Druufs are onto our location on the basis of this evidence? It doesn't amount to a hill of beans! Have those people over in Intelligence lost their minds?"

Biologist Costara assumed the question had been directed at him. He appeared to be helpless. "I'm afraid I'm at a loss. I'm more interested in the method of bio chemical preservation that's involved with these Druuf children – the ones they're supposed to have substituted for the sleeping humans in those strange containers. I can't figure that out, either."

Rosberg brushed back his greying hair with both hands. In some annoyance he shoved the report aside and turned his attention to the accompanying photographs. In a short time he concluded that he couldn't do much with these either. The basic facts were just not sufficient.

"You should join the mathematical team," the biologist advised him. "I'd say by now half the crew must have been in the computer room. But I don't think that our relatively-limited equipment can handle the complex

variables involved in the question at hand. Those machines are too specialized to be able to just quickly analyze . . .”

“What are you talking about!” Rosberg grumbled. “If it were up to me we’d be out there at our first transition point by now. If these monsters do break through and find us, what do you think will happen back home? Have you ever actually seen the giant Druuf fleet? Were you ever close to the so-called discharge zone on the actual battle front? At last report there were supposed to be 40,000 heavy-class ships out there trying to break through the Arkonide blockade fleets. If such a massive force were to surprise us all of a sudden, with our few major class fighting ships we’d be rubbed out in a matter of minutes.”

Rosberg shoved his light service cap onto his angular skull and trudged with heavy steps to the door.

Dr. Miguel Costara looked after him pensively. He was moved by a certain vision Rosberg had invoked by his remarks of moments before. “Back home,” thought the scientist. Ah yes, back home . . . He could smell the subtle fragrance of a vast pine forest and savor the crystal clean air by a gushing waterfall and feel the spray on his face. Such things as these were ‘back home’ – on the blue, blue Earth.

* * *

“. . . be sending you the written evaluations over to the *DRUSUS* within a quarter of an hour.” Atlan’s voice sounded in the loudspeakers. “The bottom line is this: you can rely pretty much on what you’ve got.”

“What does it look like?” Rhodan asked.

“Bad for the Earth, which means it’s bad for all humanoid races in the Milky Way. Nobody wants an infiltration of these completely alien insect creatures, who ought to have enough living space in their own universe, anyway. The robot Brain reports there’s a 99% certainty that the Earth’s discovery is imminent I’ve checked out all of the robot’s research data. This material has been obtained from our latest defensive engagements and are reliable. The Brain has made its deductions on the basis of thorough investigations made by Arkonide examination teams on board a number of captured Druuf ships. According to this, the science of these intelligences—especially in mathematics – is so highly developed that they are capable of drawing conclusions from their successful transmitter contact with the Earth. It is certain that whenever they have a mind to do so they will be able to find the Earth. There’s nothing more I can tell you.”

Rhodan stared a long time at the viewscreen. Atlan waited patiently. He knew what his friend must be experiencing, which led him to realize that he himself was identified with all of humanity.

“What are you going to do, Perry?” asked the Admiral.

Rhodan seemed to be startled from the depths of his broodings. He smiled uncertainly. “Fly home and keep my eyes open. At the moment I don’t see any other alternative. Does the Brain give any particulars as to what means the Druufs might employ if they were set on making a specific attack inside the Einstein universe?”

“That’s the 1% uncertainty factor the Robot came up with. Otherwise the calculations would stand at 100%. Whatever I can do to keep our blockade going will be done. That is my promise to the Earth.”

Rhodan only nodded. Further words were useless.

“Maybe the Druufs’ plan will never be carried out,” said the Arkonide consolingly. “It’s even questionable that they are intending an Earth invasion in the first place. You ought to get in touch with your agent you have in the Druuf universe. This . . . this . . .”

“Ernst Ellert.”

“That’s right, Ernst Ellert. Under the circumstances he might know more about it.”

Again Rhodan nodded. At the same moment the detachment of robots arrived at the ground-lock with the computer analysis readouts. The officer of the guard advised the Control Central.

“Your messengers are here. I want to thank you, friend.” Rhodan was weary. I’ll be taking off now. Don’t forget us entirely. We had good times together, although you once had the idea that you had to get rid of me.”

Atlan laughed softly. “I have a small request, Perry. On Venus there’s a girl named Marlis Centre. She was helpful to me when your specialists were on my track. Would you convey to her my kindest regards? Tell her I wouldn’t have neglected her if your own mad schemes hadn’t taken so much of my time. You remember the dark-haired student of cosmobiology with the strong sense of justice?”

Rhodan’s smile became warmer. Yes, he remembered her. “I’ll keep it in mind. By now she must have gotten her doctorate. Should I give her your message even if she’s married?”

Atlan hesitated slightly before he answered. “Yes, even then. And now, farewell, my friend. Keep in mind that behind the Regent of Arkon is Atlan

from the ruling family of Gonozal, and consider also that the human race carries a trace of Arkonide blood from long ago. When I landed on Terra 10,000 years ago, many marriages were consummated between my men and the native women there. Inkar, who was the commander of the battle cruiser *Paito*, has never been forgotten in South America. His son became the first Inca, the first god-king under the sun symbol of my venerable family house. I wish you safe journey, little barbarian.”

The *DRUSUS* took off under escort of 10 fast cruisers of the Imperial Fleet. Close to the outer borders of the Arkon System the other ships veered off and the Terrestrial supergiant prepared for its first transition. There was no further message from Atlan.

There was a mood of depression on board. Everyone suddenly realized that a true friend had been left behind.

3.

OPERATION COLUMBUS

Maj. Untcher, Chief of the 4th Security Patrol Wing in the 16th Space Pursuit Force, was the first to detect the strange energy source.

His group consisted of the light cruiser *AUSTRIA* and 27 disc-shaped smaller ships of the ultra-fast space-jet class. The *AUSTRIA* was thus the lead ship of the 4th SPPF-16.

Untcher had just been issued exactly 32 liters of fresh water by the supply officer so that he could take a shower. As he was turning about in the pitifully faint stream of the shower spray, he received the emergency message from the tracking center.

A viewscreen lighted up. He recognized the face of the Communications officer who was on watch at the time. All units of the security patrol group were presently located 102 light-hours beyond the orbit of Pluto in interstellar space. For the purpose of screening their movements, this stretch was only being traversed at normal light speed. Since the battle readiness mode of operation within the Solar System, the order was in effect that all hypertransitions should be avoided unless absolutely necessary.

Untcher was a lean-figured man with premature lines of aging in his face. He grumbled complainingly as he turned off the hot water. The meter registered a fresh water consumption of 23 liters, so far.

"Can't anybody be left in peace around here?" he yelled at the pickup mike. "Even here in the shower, for cripes sakes! I suppose I'm also on display in your viewscreen!"

"Yes sir," confirmed the 1st lieutenant insensibly. "I beg your pardon, sir. We are picking up a strange source of energy in Auriga near the giant star, Capella. Nothing on the screens yet but the hypersensors are going wild."

Untcher cut off any further discussion. He made one leap into the hot-air drier and reached for his underwear.

10 minutes later he arrived breathlessly in the fast cruiser's Control Central. The 27 space-jets were green blips in the 3-D screens of the translight echo-sensor consoles. The regulation distance between the escort jets was 5 million kilometers. The *AUSTRIA* flew in the middle of the stretched-out surveillance line.

In the tracking room next to the Com Central it sounded as though a volcano were erupting. The two hypersensors were roaring in instantaneous reaction to a disturbance of the 4-dimensional continuum. But it was clearly not due to ordinary hyper-shockwaves. The energy pulses created by spaceships going into transition always showed a different pattern than this.

Somewhat disconcertedly, Untcher listened to the incessant roaring. The automatic analyzers had already determined the source of these noises. Close to the giant binary star Capella, some 42 light-years away, something had taken form that nobody could figure out – not even Untcher or his highly qualified tracking operators.

Until 1st Lt. Fynkus recognized it. With slow deliberation he said: “Sir, it sounds as if we were close to the discharge zone in the Myrtha System.”

Untcher stared at him. “Hey, what are you talking about?! That zone is almost 6500 light-years from here!”

“That doesn’t alter the fact that I know this kind of rumbling noise, sir. I was out there long enough. Something is wrong in Auriga. Take a look at those flat spikes in the energy pattern. That’s absolutely typical of a discharge zone. The thing even seems to be stable already. Don’t you remember the tracking experiences we had during the last Druuf attack?”

Untcher was conscientious enough to give credence to the experienced officer’s opinion. The thundering of the hypersensors continued. Fynkus wandered over to the matter-tracking console. The sergeant who operated it shook his head without a word. Fynkus nodded.

“No alien objects have shown up yet, sir,” he stated, matteroffactly. “But the energy pattern has not changed.”

Untcher looked about him indecisively. He suddenly realized that the incident had placed the burden of responsibility on himself. Could he – should he put out a radio communication. Pluto was in a favorable position but was still too far away for normal wavebands.

Certainly the other ships of the 16th Pursuit Force must have heard the same thing on their hypersensors. Why hadn’t the Chief contacted them already? Had it become too dangerous now to contact a ship outside the Solar System, in spite of the sharp directional beam transmission available? Even so, the mathematicians in the PF-16’s flagship should have come to the same conclusion as 1st Lt. Fynkus.

So in this case, what was expected of him? What was one Maj. Untcher supposed to do?

He walked back and forth in the comparatively small tracking room. The situation was getting to be too much for him.

What sense did it make, he thought, to wait out here in empty space 102 light-hours from Pluto's orbit with his few small spaceships? In an emergency he wouldn't be able to do much with them. On the other hand his 27 space-jets and the fast cruiser *AUSTRIA* would play a more decisive role in the assembled mass of the whole pursuit force.

If he did not turn back at once he would also still face the danger of being tracked and observed by any possible alien ships that might appear. Out here in open space he didn't have the covering screen of the Solar System with its millions of lines of force, where the additional planetary masses offered excellent protection against element-tracing instruments.

Within 3 minutes Untcher made his decision. "I want a radio dispatch to all jets," he ordered, "but over regular UHF. Tell them to break the picket line and fly non-formation on return course to Pluto sector, where they are to join PF-16. All hypercom traffic is prohibited! Highest acceleration rates to be held at 100 km per second squared and there will be no trans-light velocities. We have a tracking hazard out of Capella sector. Switch all jet-pulse wave-dampers to maximum."

The auto-dictation machine had transcribed his words. First Lt. Fynkus looked questioningly across the room at his formation chief.

"That's it," Untcher told him. "Get that on the air. UHF will have a lapse time getting to the farthest deployment points. The *AUSTRIA* will hold present position until we see the last jet blip bug out of the echo-sensor. I want to make sure that everyone clears the area."

Untcher made a light salute, barely touching the peak of his cap, which was a bit too broad for his thin and somewhat wrinkled face. As he exited through the circular security hatchway with a gangly movement of his legs, no man of the crew was moved to laugh.

The hypersensors continued to roar and rumble ominously. The phenomenon which had taken shape so surprisingly out there 42 light-years away was not conducive to levity.

Fynkus personally transmitted the orders. The nearest space-jets would be picking up the dispatch within about 17 seconds whereas the flank positions would take longer.

The propulsion engines in the *AUSTRIA*'s ring bulge thundered at full power for several seconds. When they shut off again the sentry cruiser had already picked up speed.

"If those jet crews are on their toes," muttered Fynkus half aloud, "they'll know by now there's something in the wind."

One of the Communications men whispered to his companion: "How about that? The winds of space!"

* * *

"Thank God!" said Col. Poskanov, relieved. "Untcher caught on. His ships are picking up speed. Ah, he's letting them break formation; that's good! He's even smart enough to lay off the hypercom. Still better! He's evidently wise to the fact he's a sitting duck out there."

Poskanov straightened up. For a few moments it had seemed as though he was going to thrust his face right into the big 3-D screen of the echo-sensor. He quickly wiped the pearls of sweat from his forehead. Then he listened again to the thundering of the hypersensors on board the battle cruiser *OSAGE*.

What Maj. Untcher could not see was clearly visible here in the bulky special equipment of the giant ship. The typical spacewarp pattern of an equally typical discharge cone was clearly outlined on the energy tracking screen. It looked as though some invisible giant in interstellar space had dropped an elongated flower blossom. whatever the contours of it might appear to be, the fact remained that an overlap fissure had formed through which a tremendous interchange of energies was occurring between the lines of force in the Einstein universe and those of the Druuf plane.

Poskanov watched breathlessly as the structure's upper arch became more and more apparent. He had had a number of months of opportunity to become visually familiar with the naturally evolved discharge zone near the Myrtha System. So nobody had to tell him that the Fleet Command's instructions concerning the Arkonide Atlan was obsolete news already! *This* phenomenon had nothing to do either with the Regent of Arkon or the Greater Imperium.

The scientific team of the *OSAGE* was already at work. The first estimates of the situation were submitted to him. When Poskanov learned that they were only dealing at present with the energy cone itself but not yet with alien spaceships, he decided to send a hypercom report to the Fleet High Command.

There was still time to initiate precautionary measures. After the alien ships Poskanov expected finally did appear, it would be too late for any open communications with the numerous spaceships under way in the depths of

the galaxy.

3 minutes following the transmission of his lengthy report, the vernier sensors of the *OSAGE* registered a weak spacewarp shock. The automatic analyzer revealed that the ship that had just completed a hypertransition was of Terranian construction. Only very special instruments could detect it, which clearly indicated that the vessel had come through hyperspace under protection of a residual energy absorber. The unavoidable shock waves were initially intercepted by the ship's hyper-compensators but the recoil effects of this equipment were then trapped by the residual absorbers. It was practically impossible to detect a spaceship that was so equipped, much less exactly pinpoint its location. But the cruisers of the Solar Space Pursuit Forces possessed special vernier sending instruments that made it possible, which also meant that they could differentiate between friend and foe.

In this case what appeared on their screens was the vast shape of the *DRUSUS*.

Lt.-Col. Hauer, commander of the *OSAGE*, sighed with relief when he recognized the Fleet flagship. The *DRUSUS* had rematerialized at the outer fringes of the system and was now hurtling at a mad pace toward its objective.

Seconds later, what happened had been expected by Poskanov as a matter of course. Ships of the *DRUSUS* class were equipped with tracking and sensor instruments that practically nothing could elude. Even before the Chief of Pursuit Force 16 had a chance to hail the super-battleship, the *OSAGE* receivers were active.

Rhodan's face appeared on the main screen. The rough, unfocused scanning lines of the picture raster indicated that the *DRUSUS*' transmitter was operating at the lowest possible energy output. Rhodan seemed to know what was transpiring in the Earth's portion of the galaxy.

"Rhodan to battle cruiser-who are you?"

"Battle cruiser *OSAGE*, Space Pursuit Force 16, Col. Poskanov speaking.

"Ah, Poskanov, good!" answered Rhodan. "I presume that Marshal Freyt assigned you to the outer defense perimeter?"

"Yes sir, shortly after the *DRUSUS* took off. Have you been advised that a discharge cone has formed in the Capella sector?"

"Correct. We spotted it before we went into our final transition. Have Headquarters been notified?"

“10 minutes ago, sir. I was able to risk it since nothing’s shown up yet other than the overlap rift itself. My advanced jet group under Maj. Untcher is returning in normal flight mode. Everything is in order there, sir.”

“Very good. Effective immediately you are under Gen. Deringhouse’s command. Your base is Pluto. If it should happen that the shipyards and supply depots there are attacked or destroyed, according to catastrophe provisions of Operation Columbus you are to pull back to the orbit of Saturn where you will join up with the Middle Sector Fleet under my command. Wait for further instructions and use no hyper-frequencies in case any alien ships are sighted.”

The video contact became weaker as the *DRUSUS* drew farther away at close to the speed of light.

Col. Poskanov was perplexed and dismayed. Catastrophe provisions? Operation Columbus? That plan was for use in case the Earth was discovered! Hastily he called into the microphone: “Sir, are we to expect an Arkonide attack?”

“Nonsense! Atlan is on our side. What you see out there is something the Druufs have established. Prepare yourself to be literally deluged by countless fighter ships of all classes. Our only chance lies in not attracting their attention. The fact the discharge cone is near Capella shows that the Druuf mathematicians can make mistakes. Their calculations are off by a good 42 light-years. As of now there can be no more open communications. If you have to send out messages, use low output and tight beams.”

Before Rhodan’s face faded entirely, Poskanov saw and heard the First Administrator of the Solar Empire to let out a bitter laugh. Seconds later the connection was broken.

Although Poskanov urged his signal tracing operators to hang onto it, they failed to capture any more of the superbattleship’s rapidly-fading communication. This pointed up the fact that sharp beaming and precise directional handling could be a hindrance to detection. A trace would only be possible if an enemy ship happened to cross the transmission zone by some unlucky accident Poskanov resolved to take the greatest conceivable precautionary measures. But the galaxy was vast and at any rate 42 light-years was a wide enough gap to help them escape discovery, with luck.

A chill came over Poskanov when he thought of the gigantic fleet of the inhuman Druufs. Near the blockade front in the Myrtha System he had had sufficient opportunity to witness the fury of the aliens’ attacks.

“Not that!” he muttered Half-aloud. “Not here! Hauer, inform the individual commanders of Rhodan’s instructions. But take care you don’t let a single pulse-signal escape the directional beam.”

The commander glanced across at the cabinets where the spacesuits were kept Poskanov understood.

“Not yet,” he decided. “We still have time – you might say a period of grace. I’m going to . . .”

A message from the Com Central interrupted the pursuit force chief. The loudspeakers blared.

“There’s a big batch of pulse-coded traffic going out from Terra,” announced the duty officer. “So far, more than 40 dispatches. Our directional trace indicates that they are being sent to all possible sectors. All ships outside the system are being restricted from either takeoff or communication. Effective immediately, all commercial traffic is frozen. Patrol cruisers in the Outer Fleet are getting special orders. It’s going out on an assembly line, sir. Ye gods – Headquarters doesn’t waste any time!”

Poskanov elected to remain silent. His face was grave.

The inter-com screen faded. When the briefing messages had all gone out to the commanders of the various units of the pursuit force and the confirmations had all come back, the squadron chief felt a little better. He knew that everything humanly possible had been done.

This fact served to lift Poskanov’s depressed spirits. The colonel sat down in the command chair and turned to the commander of the *OSAGE*. Lt.-Col. Hauer had all he could do to keep a tight ship and hold to regulation procedures while answering the numerous standby readiness signals from his battle stations.

The colonel waited a moment or so until Hauer leaned back in his seat with a sigh of relief. From the battle cruiser’s tracking room they could hear the continued rumbling of the hypersensors. The sound had become steadier now, which was a sign that the observed discharge cone was reaching a point of stabilization. Probably a state of constant energy exchange had been established between the two universes.

“I’m glad Rhodan is back home!” said Poskanov softly. “It will raise the Fleet morale and speed up everything that has to be done. Hauer, I’m afraid we’re just now on the eve of a cosmic war. Whatever we’ve gone through before is probably nothing compared to what’s ahead of us. In fact, by comparison I’d say that all our previous operations and commando missions were nothing but light skirmishes, of no account at all.”

The commander loudly blew his nose and then carefully replaced his old-fashioned linen handkerchief in the outer breastpocket of his uniform jacket. Poskanov watched him with amusement. Hauer was an able officer but sometimes he was a bit fussy. However, all that changed whenever he had to make decisions concerning the welfare of his ship. Then he could act surprisingly fast and use an iron fist.

“Sir,” he said, finally, “I’m not fond of issuing firing orders but if it has to be I won’t hesitate a second.”

Poskanov thought that those few words just about wrapped up everything that everybody on board the Terranian ship was thinking. Out there in the depths of interstellar space loomed a deadly threat to the existence of humanity. Alien, inhuman beings were about to reach out for the *Lebensraum* of other races of people.

Inwardly the thought had a calming and settling effect on Poskanov to know that he would be fighting in self-defense if it came to a battle. It was a good feeling to have that part of it straight and clear.

“Nobody wants this war, there’s nobody yearning to have it happen – so why is it happening, anyway?” he asked bitterly. “I’m not at all fond of shooting other intelligences. And, by God, we’ve got every kind of destructive weapon to throw against them! I wonder if those creatures we call the ‘Druufs’ really know that.”

“They know it, sir,” answered Hauer calmly. His broad hands clutched the armrests of his chair as though to prevent him and the seat from plunging into some fathomless abyss.

“They know it, sir!” he repeated. His eyes were fixed on the glowing screens of the panob gallery before him. The billions of stars of the Milky Way were gleaming as brightly as ever. Never had space seemed emptier and friendlier.

* * *

The crucial strategic meeting between the Fleet officers and those of Solar Security took place in the middle of May 2044 in the underground Headquarters of the Central High Command. The giant deep bunker installations had been built exclusively for Operation Columbus so that under catastrophic conditions all necessary security measures could be met with.

The Command Central had required 10 years of labor. With all of its vast and costly automatic equipment it formed the nerve center of the Solar

Empire. Admiral Atlan had once scornfully remarked that by Arkonide standards it was nothing more than a backwoodsman's shack but Perry Rhodan and the other leaders of the Earth of course had quite another opinion of it.

Defense mobilization plans had long since been worked out by the best scientists and strategists of the Earth and had been constantly updated and improved according to the latest status of science and technology so that now they were activated in the astonishingly short time-span of just 2 hours. Had the necessary precautions not been taken, and if Operation Columbus had never been thought out down to the smallest and even negligible details and then fine-honed to perfection, the still-young Solar Empire would have already been plunged into chaos.

Immediately after Rhodan's arrival, all emergency laws came into effect. Having been preprogrammed for years for this situation, special positronic brains distributed a global alert signal into the fully automatic alarm systems of the giant industries around the planet. Within a period of just 30 minutes, all peacetime manufacturing ceased. New data for assembly lines, technicians and responsible directors were given. Having been prepared for such a case as this, the great manufacturing and processing plants of the Earth were converted almost at once. Stockpiled raw materials, specifically earmarked for emergency production, were brought out of storage bunkers into the halls of industry.

No one in America, Europe, Asia, Australia or the colonized polar regions required any blueprint for action or special instructions at this crucial hour. What each one had to do or bring forth had already been determined.

The benefits of herculean labors during the last few decades were now beginning to be seen. The Planning Ministry in Terrania was only pestered in isolated cases by people doublechecking their assignments. The calling in of Fleet reservists progressed with equal rapidity. Huge transports standing ready for takeoff and operated by the major airlines of the Earth now proceeded to bring the reserve units to the designated spaceports.

Never before in history had there been such a perfectly coordinated organization as this. The new Moon Base was running at full capacity. Especially in the case of such small, swift spaceships as pursuitships, interceptors and Gazelles and space-jets, production rolled in quick succession through the staging checkpoints on the assembly lines.

Terra was strong – tremendously strong – in terms of the smaller fighting units, and in this regard it was actually not far behind the Arkonide Empire. The only thing that had not yet been done was to generate a capacity for

pushing out major class fighting ships at the same speed of production.

It still required a number of years to construct a battlecruiser measuring 500 meters in diameter. But in spite of all possible methods of speedup and simplifications it was still estimated that the completion of a super battleship of the Imperium class would require at least 12 years. Whereas such a task might be accomplished in an approximate period of only 5 months if one were equipped with the mammoth production means of the Arkonides.

Since Rhodan was well informed concerning Terranian production he knew where the limitations of his power were. The countless smaller ships could deliver hard blows to the enemy but they were not capable of ultimately deciding the battle. There was a scarcity of heavy and super-heavy types of weapons which could only be carried by major vessels. Besides that there was a lack of deep space carrier ships which could bring the light-speed interceptors and pursuitships to the focal point of the battlefront, through hyperspace, and then launch them into the fighting.

The new 100-meter cruisers of the State class did not possess a first-rate offensive power. Earth had never been interested in attacking other races or subjugating alien populations. So the ships had been so designed and constructed that their armaments were now insufficient to meet the present situation. State class cruisers were space reconnaissance ships designed for maximum acceleration and fast scouting missions.

These were the things that came up for discussion during the strategy talks. No one overestimated his own strengths. Nobody considered Mankind to be omnipotent. On the basis of these assumptions a very conscientious and responsible defense plan was established. All available Fleet units were divided up and strategically deployed, commanders were designated and dispatches were sent out to all ships outside the Solar System.

It was certain that the appearance of a Druuf discharge funnel had suddenly placed Terra in a desperate situation. Rhodan did not presume that he might alter the condition with a wave of the hand or by means of mutant assignments. A lack of careful circumspection now could only lead to catastrophe.

The populaces of colonized planets were informed via Terra television. The armored portals of atom bomb shelters opened and subterranean supply lines began to operate. Stockpiled food and human-support materials of every description were brought down into the bunkers. Surface traffic in the major cities of the Earth began to come to a standstill. Five hours after Rhodan's landing at Terrania's spaceport, the Earth took on the appearance

of a depopulated fortress. From now on life would carry on beneath the surface of the world. Only those with the most vital assignments remained in the light of the sun.

Thousands of pursuit interceptors, destroyers and small disc-shaped spaceships roared through the skies. On the basis of laborious calculations, the heavier Solar Fleet formations were deployed into their planned battle positions.

All of this happened before the first Druuf spaceship emerged from the glowing chasm of the discharge funnel.

* * *

The digital clocks in the Fleet High Command Headquarters registered the 11th hour of the evening. The strategy conference had not yet ended. The first scientific analyses concerning the nature of the discharge zone were now available.

Khrest, the aged and wearied Arkonide scientist, reported to Rhodan with the figures. In a frighteningly sober and dispassionate form, the results revealed what humankind could expect. In addition to the questions of defense a problem had emerged which Khrest outlined in a few words: "With our inadequate means it can't be determined whether a stable discharge funnel may be due to chance or deliberate plan. Experience tells us that these energy phenomena have a short duration when they have been generated due to natural overlap effects. Since the zone we've located has held a connection between the two time-planes for 8 hours so far, and with a continuously increasing stability, it can be assumed that the Druufs have succeeded by some synthetic means to create a through-channel into our universe.

I recall the force ring field generator or warp-ring gate we employed previously, which also permitted an entrance into the other space-time continuum. I don't see why the Druufs may not have made a similar discovery. In the interests of our defense it would be safe to grant the existence of such a dangerous invention and to regard it as a fact."

This was the gist of what the Earth's mathematicians had to report. Khrest was in agreement with them. From that moment on the Chiefs of Staff of the Solar Empire resolved to make all preparations necessary for the appearance of additional discharge zones.

It was Reginald Bell who put the disquieting state of affairs into words: "We might be able to handle one of those funnels but not when they come

in bunches! If it comes to an attack on several fronts we would have to split up our forces when they're already too weak. And that, my friends, would be curtains for the Earth. Since we know we're kidding ourselves to place our bets on good fortune alone, I vote for an immediate transmission of our prepared disaster message to Atlan."

Marshal Freyt caught his breath. Allan D. Mercant remained expressionless. Rhodan put his hands behind his back and began a nerve-racking march back and forth in front of the floor-to-ceiling viewscreen.

After several minutes he came to a stop in front of the chart table. "A message to Atlan? Very nice. But that would be absolutely in the last resort. In order for Atlan to help us, you know he has to send ships. That means he has to reveal the location of Earth, or else the ships will never get here. From that moment on, all intelligences of the galaxy would know where Terra can be found. Our long-standing game of hide-and-seek would be at an end."

"Sooner or later we're going to have to lay our cards on the table, anyway," interjected Mercant.

"That's right, sooner or later! But it's my intention to remain undiscovered as long as possible. We're still too weak to hold our own in a wide-open cosmic game with the galactic races. Mercant – " Rhodan interrupted himself. "Mercant, we ought to try to frustrate the plans of the Druufs with the means we have at hand. Send John Marshall to me."

The Security Chief had mental reservations in this regard. Under present circumstances he did not consider the mutants had a chance. As he was getting to his feet, however, the event occurred that everyone at Headquarters had been expecting for hours: a viewscreen lit up. The face of Maj. Abucot was recognized.

"Com Central, Security," he identified himself. "Sir, we have just deciphered a hyper-pulse dispatch from our advance squadron. The first space fleet units are emerging from the discharge funnel. So far Col. Poskanov has tracked 500 of the alien ships. The number is increasing continuously. Judging from the contour trace data, none of the ships are less than 200 meters in length. This means that heavy class fighting units are being employed."

Marshall Freyt drew a finger across his throat significantly. Reginald Bell grinned ironically.

Rhodan's voice interrupted the heavy silence. "Thank you. Contact me the minute you have further news. But not for every ship you see. For the ships

that are sighted, let's start dealing with units of 100."

Abucot understood. He cut off the connection.

"That's a real cheerful outlook," said Bell ironically. "Counting them up by the hundreds, eh? How many Druuf spacers are you figuring on, anyway?"

"According to our observations and findings at the blockade front, they'll fly their first attack with at least 5000 ships. If those get destroyed they'll come back with 10,000 more.

Marshal Freyt looked for a place to sit down. Rhodan started pacing again along the front of the master view-screen. While so doing he muttered almost inaudibly. "Everything depends on whether or not they find us. In the first place they seem to think the Capella System is ours. Let them keep thinking it Mercant, once and for all will you call John Marshall and prepare for a special mutant assignment? I have a definite idea."

Before the Security Chief reached the grav lift, Rhodan called after him: "Hasn't our base on Hades reported in yet?"

Mercant shook his head. "No. But the fast cruiser *NIPPON* is at the Arkonide blockade front. The transmitter connection with Hades is working perfectly. I'm waiting any hour for further information."

"That information must not be sent by radio. Have you made that clear to the commander?"

"That's understood, sir. If necessary, Maj. Matsuro will emerge out of hyperspace close to the Earth. We've made all preparations for muffling the shockwaves. But if by that time we've already been discovered, I'll make direct contact with Matsuro. Then it won't make any difference if the message is traced or not."

In troubled thought, Rhodan watched the Security Chief depart. Now everything depended on not making one mistake.

4.

2000 DRUUF SHIPS

The *STAR OF TERRA* was an older standard-class cruiser which had been converted for freight and passenger service. On the 16th of May, at 14:32 standard time, it had taken off according to schedule from the intercosmic spaceport on the main planet of the Vega System.

For some years now the *STAR OF TERRA* had been part of a line service between the planetary systems of Sol and the giant sun Vega, since passenger traffic had continued to increase as a result of the brisk commercial relations between humans and the Ferronians.

The commander was Capt. Carl Lister, a former astronaut of the Fleet. Lister was considered to be capable and decisive and was also known to be pleasant in both speech and manner. Since in addition to this his portly figure gave him an air of respectability and he was in the habit of maintaining jovial and easy-going relations with the passengers and crew, he was the ideal man to be in charge of a spaceship of the merchant fleet.

Lister's military career had been under an ill-fated star. He had never been able to get on the good side of his superior officers. Among his comrades he had simply been regarded as a bad-luck Charlie. At critical moments he always made a mess of what he could have accomplished masterfully under normal conditions, even while half asleep. So Lister had decided to leave the spacefleet and since then he had functioned as the commander of the *STAR OF TERRA*.

For 6 years there had been no mishaps or serious accidents and this had given Lister reason to believe that his old run of bad luck had finally left him. But it was his fate that the nearly forgotten plague of misfortunes should revisit him precisely at the moment when everything depended upon an exact adherence to regulations.

Lister had just eaten in the first class diningroom with the passengers. He had just delivered one of his gallant and patriarchal observations and also had given permission to a young man to inspect the engine rooms. Fifteen minutes later the transition calculations had been completed and the *STAR OF TERRA* went into a normal hyperjump. Lister covered the 27 light-years to the not-too-distant Earth in a single transition because basically he thought it foolish to subject his passengers twice to such an inconvenience.

To this extent everything would have worked out just fine if Capt. Lister had not jumped into the hyper-dimension at the *exact* moment that the main station on Terrania had sent into cosmic space the warning message that was specifically directed to himself. So it was that Lister did not pick up the critical instructions. When the ship rematerialized within 7 light-hours of Pluto's orbit, Terrania had already stopped broadcasting its warnings. Thus the *STAR OF TERRA* flew toward the outer limits of the Solar System at 80% SPEOL.

In conformance with safety regulations, Lister reduced his speed still further. At only 70% SPEOL, the freight-passenger ship swung onto course for its final destination.

Shortly thereafter the old captain's misfortune was completed. Precisely when the first Druuf spaceships were emerging from the discharge funnel, Lister decided to announce his early arrival over hypercom. He sent out a loosely beamed message in which, among other things, he reported that the Ferronian ruler lay on his death bed. Since he considered this to be a fairly important piece of news he felt justified in really laying it on. He also sent it uncoded in clearly sharp Morse signals, using the prescribed hyper-frequency band assigned to commercial channels.

Even this would not have been an irretrievable mistake if Pluto and Vega had not been in unfortunate alignment at the moment. The Solar System's outermost planet was on the opposite side of the sun in relation to the discharge zone, so that the course of the *STAR OF TERRA* was on a line directly aimed at it. Thus it happened that although the sloppy directional beam reached the Earth alright it also cut a direct line outward toward the Capella System.

After he had been transmitting for 20 seconds, the ship's receiver crackled loudly. The enraged countenance of a major of the Fleet became visible on the viewscreen.

"Have you lost your mind?" the voice blatted deafeningly from the loudspeakers. "Stop that brass-pounding at once! Switch off, you fool! We're in Operation Columbus! I'm going to court-martial you! Don't let out another peep, do you hear? You're beaming straight to Capella!"

With that the contact was abruptly cut off.

Capt. Lister had turned pale. According to his custom he had come into the Com Room to personally supervise the transmission of his report. Lister grabbed the operator's hand to stop him and the man stared at him horrified. Naturally they both knew the significance of 'Operation

Columbus’.

“For God’s sake!” groaned the officer on duty. “Sir, Terrania must have sent out a warning signal to us!”

“When we were in hyperspace,” said Lister, scared to death. He realized what he had done. And he also knew that the threat must be coming from the Capella System.

Without saying another word, he turned around and trudged dazedly to the exit. Beyond lay the Command Central. The grapevine had already spread the word. The men watched their captain disconcertedly as he crossed the big room, pale and staring.

Lister walked about as if in a dream. The single thought bored into him that he had committed involuntary treason but then what also nagged at him was this merciless fate that always made him a bad-luck Charlie. He could have screamed but not a sound escaped his lips. His portly frame had the look of a wounded animal that was struggling toward the safety of its cave with its last ounce of strength. He would be spared from nothing now – neither torture of mind nor anguish of soul.

At the entrance to the Command Central stood a group of passengers. The Second Officer of the *STAR OF TERRA*, being assigned to the normal ship operations, was just explaining the virtues of a bulkhead system, using the simplest possible phraseology. Lister felt someone touch his arm. Mrs. Nattan was the wife of the director of the General Cosmic Co., a mining operation on Ferrol. At this moment she loudly proclaimed her enthusiasm over the ship’s tour. “Oh my dear captain, it’s just heavenly! I never realized that there were such things. Why this spaceship is a miracle! And it’s astounding how all this functions!”

Carl Lister smiled through his torment. “Of course, Madame – naturally it functions.”

The old matriarch’s shrill laughter made him wince. He listened listlessly to the profusion of conversation, until someone addressed him again.

“But my dear fellow. You look pale! Don’t you feel well?”

“It’s . . . it’s just the trip . . . ha! ha! A young greenhorn like me often gets space sick . . . ha! ha!”

Capt. Lister swayed slightly as he closed the door of his cabin behind him. Breathing heavily he threw himself on his bunk, where he lay staring at the ceiling with unseeing eyes.

“You fool! . . . Operation Columbus! . . . court-martial . . . Capella . . .

brass-pounding . . .!” It hammered into his skull. Suddenly groaning aloud, he cursed the day that he first walked up the wide steps of the Space Academy.

* * *

Only a few humans might have comprehended the function of the alien apparatus. Instead of the usual computation curves of a magnetically guided polygraph, as would have been expected of an Earthly positronic brain, this machine spewed out a maze of strange geometric symbols.

Inwardly it did not differ much from the equipment that had been built by humanoid life forms but the mathematics involved was something related to alien, inhuman intelligences. With this fundamental difference the multiple circuits were logic-gated so that the output data simply appeared in another form. But these were mere superficialities. What was more important was the faultless reliability of operation at this particular moment.

The gloomy red light in the room was reflected in the huge eyes of the monstrous creature who stood motionlessly before the machine until the last symbols appeared. The organic antennas of the Druuf picked up an ultra-high-pitched whistle tone that was in a frequency range of 200,000 cps. With what seemed to be a very slow moment, he shut off the P-calculator. With a heavy tread the 10-foot giant marched to the open, unpanelled doorway.

In the next room were giant oval-shaped viewscreens and a mass of equipment that looked like a display of abstract art. Dark, spherical heads with lipless triangular mouths and fluorescent eyes turned to look at the one who had entered.

This might have been one of the deepest sub-cellars of Hell. No human would have heard anything here and yet there was conversation. Normal articulation was replaced by ultra-high impulses, and the body antennas picked up the vibrations, conducting them into their brains for processing. But they were not all that unintelligible, these insect derivations from an alien time-plane that had no connection with the known universe.

The ‘silent’ conversation between the officers and the chief mathematician of the long, rod-shaped heavy fighting ship took place within about 16 minutes after their reception of the strange hypercom transmission. The Druufs had not needed more time than this to complete the signal trace. Other calculation machinery began to function. On the surface of a

spherical indicator appeared the stars of that sector of space which surrounded the discharge funnel. The surprisingly well-articulated hand of a Druuf pointed to a place on the sphere where 4 tracer lines intersected. At that spot was a small, yellow sun.

The deep thundering of the engines became louder. The ship was increasing its speed. Simultaneously the first of the signal data were sent out. Another formation of 500 ships had just come through the discharge rift and now swung off. On the viewscreens of the lead ship gleamed the head of a Druuf.

Essentially what he said was: "Sending you bearings on the signal. Investigate and report. If findings are positive, I will follow."

500 heavy-class fighter ships disappeared. It was a phenomenon that human scientists referred to as 'sneaking into the 5th dimension'. In contrast to Arkonide principles of operation the Druuf hyperspace travel technique was based on a linear duration of movement under the influence of 5th-dimensional laws. The mode of 'flying' was smooth rather than an abrupt transition jump. In this respect the Druufs were superior to all intelligent life forms whose hyperspace propulsion equipment was based on Arkonide designs.

Producing only a brief and low amplitude shockwave, the squadron disappeared into extra-dimensional space and picked up speed. Neither was there an actual dematerialization as with Earthly spaceships, nor was there any painful process of dissolution or loss of consciousness. At many thousands of time faster than light-speed they flew toward that point from which a hypercom transmission had been received. The trace coordinates were precise, of this there could be no doubt. The only factor of uncertainty was whether the rhythmic signals had come from the Terrans they were seeking or had been propagated by a passing merchant ship of some unknown race. In the latter case they would merely have demonstrated the excellence of their tracing technology without having arrived at any practical results.

So they would just have a look at what was going on in the vicinity of this unimportant little star. Since the Druuf mentality related to comparative measurements of size and mass it seemed to them almost impossible that such a significant race as the Terrans could have developed under the light of such a weak sun.

The Druuf fleet flagship flew to mighty Capella but no intelligent life could be found on any of its planets. So an order for assembly was given. 2000 ships, which according to plan were reinforced every hour with additional

groups of 500 each, soon made their appearance in the outer reaches of the Capella System. The commanding Druuf was concerning himself meanwhile with the thought of ordering a careful reconnaissance of all stars lying within a radius of at least 50 light-years. Their capable mathematicians could not have miscalculated to any higher degree of error than that.

The commander-in-chief finally decided to wait for the results of the first reconnaissance assignment. There was time, plenty of time! And anyway during the waiting period they could prepare exact star charts and at the same time try to orient themselves to the great blockade front using this alien system as a reference point.

These beings from the other time-plane had planned and calculated well but of course they had not taken the Terran power of resistance into consideration. The principle Druuf commander also did not suspect that his ships had long since been tracked. But if he had known this it would have made little difference to him. What counted in the long run was the mass concentration of heavily-armed spaceships. A quick discovery of their presence would only mean a temporary impedance. But resistance was not the same as an 'untenable' situation.

One built up armaments only with patience. Squadron after squadron welled up out of the artificially-induced discharge rift. They were taking no risks, even though they were thrusting into a universe where the time rate was twice as fast as that of their own plane. By this it was plain to the chief commander that his ships would be 50% slower than the expected ships of the enemy. But if one recognizes his danger he can adjust himself accordingly. The Druufs intended to compensate for their inferior maneuverability by a superior concentration of heavy ships and super-powerful weapons.

This tactic had best demonstrated itself at the blockade front. The success of the Master Plan depended only on two objectives: to pin down the famous Arkonide Fleet with very powerful forces and then to conquer Terra and build up a second front at the backs of the Arkonides. If this succeeded, the strategy of the Druufs would change overnight.

5.

THE MOST CRITICAL MOMENT IN THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF THE HUMAN RACE

Lt. Aluf Tehete, leader of the 586th Interceptor Group in Space Pursuit Force 64 was one of the first Terranian officers to hurl his 1-man pursuit ship at the heavy phalanx of the Druuf reconnaissance ships. Basically Tehete's interceptor was nothing much more than a projectile, 15 meters long and 1.5 meters in diameter. Ninety percent of the interior space was taken up by a compact high-powered propulsion unit.

In addition to this it possessed a fixed heavy impulse cannon but whenever the monstrous piece of ordnance was fired it seemed to the pilot that his outer hull was going to blow to atoms. The defense screen was almost pitifully weak but even more skimpy was the area that the designers had allotted to the pilot.

Tehete crouched in a narrow observation capsule which was the cockpit. It was directly behind the sharp bow, which was integral with the cannon muzzle. Actually it was asking a lot to send young men into battle under such conditions but the pursuit pilots were satisfied. They didn't envy the men who had to serve on board a 'fat' ship. Pursuit pilots had more freedom. They saw and heard what was going on in space and they never had to wait for permission to fire. They had to decide on their own, attack on their own and rely on themselves for survival.

The Druuf ships had hardly returned to normal space before they were spotted by the fast cruisers of the SPF-64 and simultaneously Tehete led his group into the attack front. On the control column in front of him was an adjustment that permitted a skillful control of the jet pressure vanes. This provided a fabulous maneuverability, the effects of which the completely surprised Druufs were to feel a few minutes later.

The first space combat in defense of Terra was exclusively an engagement between the Earthly interceptor forces and the Druuf scouting units. Not one heavy vessel of the Solar Fleet took part in it. Everything happened too swiftly to permit any maneuvers on the part of the major fighting ships.

These fleet hornets swarming out of the various cruiser squadrons struck the first successful surprise blow. Equipped with guns that were more suitable to a 500-meter battle cruiser, they generated a nuclear holocaust that annihilated 85% of the Druuf formation in a time-span of 7 minutes.

As Lt. Tehete placed his hand on the firing button at the upper end of the control column he was thinking of the broad steppes of his East African homeland. On the 30 cm screen of the automatic firing sight were the sharply delineated outlines of a long, rod-shaped spaceship. The green indicator of the matter tracker flashed at him insistently, signaling him that he was definitely not dealing with a Terranian ship. The alloys employed were alien, as were the propulsion radiations.

Aluf Tehete was able to determine that the Druuf he was tailing was actually flying at half the speed of light. This corroborated the data he had concerning a time-rate differential of 1 to 2.

His greater speed was an incalculable advantage. Even more vital, however, were the tiny dimensions of his machine, which could hardly be detected in the vastness of space. So he remained on target course until his automatics told him he was within 300,000 km of his quarry. It was an optimum firing distance for an interceptor. Although the distance was sufficient for his own safety the hit-probability quotient stood at 95%. His holding angle was small and the light-fast raybeam shot would strike home in a second.

His positronically guided approach maneuver brought the outlines of the alien ship into his green target circle and Tehete pressed the firing button. Since his present velocity was close to light speed, the normally imperceptible cosmic dust that was present tended to 'pack' in front of his bow. Every pursuit pilot hated this compaction effect because it made the cannon's sun-bright impulse beams optically visible. If this light-conducting medium were not present, the energy discharges could not be seen.

Tehete felt the hammer-blow recoil of his machine. In front of his cockpit was a flare of white-hot light. It expanded into a fireball from which shot a beam of energy 10 meters long and as thick as his leg.

Then it vanished into the dark deeps of the void. The beam was still out there but without the cosmic dust compaction it could no longer be observed.

Painfully blinded for the moment, the group leader pulled his ship away from the approach course. Since he was almost as fast as his weapon beam he had to avoid plunging at full speed toward the target. As Tehete shot away within 10,000 km of the Druuf ship a blue-white bubble of incandescence swelled beneath him. The energy sensor indicated a powerful burst of nuclear forces. Thus the young Terranian knew he could chalk up the first kill of the war.

His sudden shout in the speakers gave a start to the Com officers on board the flagship of the SPF-64. But Tehete's yell was not the end of it because suddenly the hyperbands came alive with victory cries. The pilots were still too young and inexperienced in battle to take their first successes with a quiet sigh of relief. They needed recognition, the word of a friend or a favorable nod from their superior officers. They yelled themselves hoarse and flew their attacks with such zeal that the powerful Druuf formation was almost totally annihilated.

During this action it happened that a cruiser of the State class emerged unexpectedly from hyperspace and was so badly hit by one of the interceptors' powerful raybeams that 3 engines were knocked out and a fire started in the power control room.

The cruiser's commander was Maj. Matsuro who was just returning with important news from the blockade front. On the basis of the urgency of his mission, Matsuro had risked bridging the great distance between the Myrtha System and Terra with only one transition. However it was seldom that one could avoid small margins of error in such a long-range jump. By comparison to the vast stretch he had covered, being off by some 80 billion km in his premature emergence could even be considered an outstanding cosmonautical feat.

It could not be determined later which pursuit pilot had fired the fateful shot. The *NIPPON* limped out of the fire line at half power. Matsuro still didn't dare send out a radio message but then the decision of the First Administrator came to his aid.

In all spaceships of the Solar Fleet, starting with the vast superbattleship *DRUSUS* and including everything down to the smallest interceptor, the viewscreens lit up to reveal Perry Rhodan, who was using a basic frequency band common to all. He was seen and heard everywhere at once.

"This is Perry Rhodan. Attention all units: effective immediately, the imposed radio silence is lifted. You can all talk. But keep strictly to your prescribed frequency channels so you don't start heterodyning. We have finally been discovered. We were able to pick up radio messages from the Druuf ships that our interceptors attacked and our experts are attempting to decipher them. You can count on a wide-open battle now. Our old game of hide-and-seek has come to an end."

Then followed a long series of deployment instructions. The numerous cruiser squadrons used short hyperjumps to transfer to the outer defense perimeter.

Close to the orbit of Saturn the second line of defense was reinforced by the main body of heavier vessels. Here Rhodan had personally taken command. The outer line was under command of Gen. Deringhouse.

Maj. Matsuro waited until the important dispatches had been completed. Only then did he hail the *DRUSUS* using priority code 1. He got his contact immediately.

Matsuro's face appeared on the giant hypercom screen of the vast battleship, whose Command Central was serving as a flying headquarters.

"Cruiser *NIPPON* – Commander, Maj. Matsuro," he announced. "I have just returned from the blockade front. But sir, in the heat of the fighting one of your interceptor pilots lost his head and mistook me for a Druuf. My ship only has a minimum spaceworthiness at present. We were able to contain the fire in the power control room by drawing out the oxygen but the Command Central is crippled. Do you have specific instructions for me, Sir?"

Rhodan grasped the situation at once. Apparently the *NIPPON* was bringing news from the Hades base. "This conversation is restricted," he decided quickly. "Launch a Gazelle and get over here to the *DRUSUS* – bring your ship on board. We'll guide you in by remote. Have your first officer take over the *NIPPON* for you. He will run a low-speed course to Pluto where he is to go into a holding orbit. Can that still be managed?"

Matsuro turned to look at his chief engineer, who nodded a confirmation. "Yes sir, the engines can still make it. But whether or not we could manage a landing can't be determined as yet."

"Good. The Pluto Base will be informed from here. I am expecting you. Prepare a damage report. I want to know the effect of that interceptor shot. Where was the *NIPPON* hit?"

"Midships above the ring bulge. The impulse beam went through both defense screens, burned through the armor plate and spent the rest of its thermo energy in the main switching room."

Matsuro was not surprised at the satisfied nod from his highest superior. Naturally Rhodan wanted to know the effect of his interceptor weapons. Probably this one piece of knowledge was worth even one light cruiser of the State class.

"OK, that's enough for now. Don't lose any time and get yourself launched out of there. I presume you have some important news, do you not . . .?"

"And how, sir! Otherwise I wouldn't be here."

Maj. Nako Matsuro felt trapped in a circle of high-ranking officers. Even Solar Marshal Allan D. Mercant was present in the Command Central of the superbattleship. There seemed to be something in the air that few men were informed about.

Matsuro had already given his report, which had been evaluated. He had been able to establish contact with the agents at the Hades Base. Upon further interrogation, the commander of the observation cruiser *NIPPON* explained: "Yes sir, the communication came through ungarbled. Capt. Rous informs us that the Druufs have succeeded in creating a synthetic discharge cone. Our cosmic agent Ernst Ellert appears to be in some difficulty. He has informed Rous that he is gradually losing his power over the Druuf scientist, Onot. Onot is being accused by the ruling Council on Druufon. They don't think he's entirely unconnected with the destruction of the main computer central."

"And of course they're right," remarked Rhodan drily. "Go on, Matsuro."

"Actually that's about all, sir. Ernst Ellert is hiding the same as ever in this Onot creature. Ellert doesn't seem to be too happy with the radio contact with the 13th planet of the giant star system. Capt. Rous fears complications."

"And what was that about this mammoth space station near the double star, Siamed?" inquired Mercant again.

Matsuro felt that with this question the unprepossessing little man had put his finger on the heart of the situation.

"That information came through just as I was about to go into transition. Ellert informed us, through Rous, that the Druufs had built some kind of giant structure. The space station's whole purpose was for generating an outlet funnel. By certain measurements Rous was also able to find out that the narrow end of the cone starts right over this space station."

No further information was to be recovered from Matsuro. The trained crew of his heavily damaged cruiser were picked up by a fleet tender and taken to the Moon Base. When Matsuro arrived there the command of a brand new ship was handed over to him immediately.

Within 7 hours of his parley with Rhodan, Maj. Matsuro took off for his first flight test

Where the Solar High Command's defense plan was concerned, these 7 hours developed into a very crucial period. On the one hand, the light cruiser *CALIFORNIA* lay briefly alongside the *DRUSUS*, parked motionlessly just over its ring bulge. It was under the command of Col. Tiffloor, who had by now become a legendary figure. And on the other hand, the top commander of the Druufs issued certain specific orders.

So when Matsuro took off for his test flight, it marked a turning point for a number of critical actions. Col. Tiffloor came on board the flagship as John Marshall, chief of the mutants, gathered his special team around him. Under protection of advance cruiser squadrons, 5000 1-man pursuit ships flew to newly assigned defense sectors. And simultaneously the first Druuf battleships emerged from the veil of hyper-dimensional space.

This time it was no mere duel on the remote periphery of the defense line with all the advantage of surprise on the Terranian side. The heavy cruiser *CATTANO*, flank ship of the SPF-106, took salvo fire from four heavy-class Druuf ships and exploded. The *CATTANO* was the first vessel of the Solar Fleet to go down in the battle for Terra.

To the consternation of the pursuit pilots a new weapon was employed by the attackers. Although it could have little effect on a really major class ship it was deadly for them. It was a thermo needle beam which was propagated in a burst of high-peak intensity thin a force-field diffraction grating so that it was split up into tens of thousands of 1-mm beams. This had the effect of an atomic shotgun with enormous fan – but capabilities and the highest degree of hit-probability.

Whereas even auxiliary craft as small as the Guppy class were not especially endangered by these high-intensity needle beams, they were deadly to the tiny interceptors and 3-man destroyers. About 60% of the attacking small craft were promptly detected and immediately fired upon by the special weapons which had been specifically designed to handle them.

Lt. Aluf Tehete flew his group into just such a beam-riddled battle zone. Neither he nor the other 11 pilots of the 586th Interceptor Group were favored with a chance to announce any victories this time. All 12 pursuitships went down before the withering fire of the on-pressing Druuf fleet.

A second or so prior to this ominous wave of destruction, Col. Poskanov withdrew the battle cruiser *OSAGE* from the front lines. The vibrator shots intended for him went by underneath the fleeing *OSAGE* and were lost in the depths of the void.

Two hours after the first major attack, an overall view of the situation was obtained. Approximately 5000 Druuf ships were being committed to the initial thrust but a rapid succession of new fleet formations was streaming out of the discharge rift.

After three hours Perry Rhodan knew that he could not prevent the destruction of Terra with the limited forces he possessed. The advance wave of Druuf ships were already attacking the Pluto base. For the time being that stronghold's terrible ground-fire was able to either shoot the aliens down or drive them away, yet it was obvious that the planet could not be held much longer.

Added to this clearly evident fact was the question of whether or not the aliens would be able to build up a second funnel. If that happened, the Terranian defense would not be able to hold out

Col. Poskanov reported the loss of 11 cruisers from his space pursuit force. The interceptors and 3-man destroyers that had been launched from the bigger ships could not be picked up again during the heavy fighting of the retreat maneuvers. Those pilots received orders to the effect that they were on their own and would have to try to break through the enemy lines in order to reach the waiting fleet of the inner defense ring, which was under Rhodan's command.

After the collapse of the outer defense perimeter, the area to be protected became smaller. The closer the action came to the central sun the more the radius of the battle plane tightened in. But in this Rhodan saw a better defense possibility. His major class ships could be concentrated more effectively and could be deployed more quickly to the focal points of the fighting.

Five hours after the start of the Druuf invasion, the Terranian super giants moved into battle for the first time. These 1500-meter brutes were the *HANNIBAL*, the *GEN. POUNDER*, the *BARBAROSSA*, the *WELLINGTON* and the *ALEXANDER*. After a short transition they suddenly appeared in the thick of the tumult and immediately opened fire. Only the *DRUSUS* and the older *TITAN* remained behind as a backup.

Never before had the Druufs experienced such a counterblow. From previous experience they recognized the super Imperium class ships but heretofore such vessels had only been manned by Arkonide robots. Behind the guns of the Terranian ships were highly qualified humans who knew very well what they were risking their lives for.

In a time-span of just 8 minutes, the *WELLINGTON* alone shot down 27

enemy vessels without being seriously endangered. Her mighty defense screens took everything the Druufs had to offer. All of which enabled the pursuing battle cruisers to have a field day with the hard-pressed invaders. There was a temporary collapse of the enemy front. The leading wedge of the Druuf attack was annihilated but an hour later the gap was reinforced again.

At this time Gen. Deringhouse called to the flagship. His lean face revealed every sign of extreme exhaustion as it appeared on the large telecom screen of the fleet flagship. Rhodan was standing before the pickup cameras.

“Sir, I estimate that Pluto will fall within the next 30 minutes. I can’t risk the big ships any longer at the front. The Druufs have a new game out here – for each of our ships from cruisers on up, they are throwing in at least 50 heavy units apiece. Till now our superior maneuverability has let us skin by in the worst cases but this is something else again. Sir, what are you going to do?”

Rhodan finally gave the order to retreat Pluto was evacuated of humans and the defense installations were left in the hands of the robots. The squadrons of the outer defense ring pulled back to the orbit of Saturn where they assembled and regrouped into new formations.

Rhodan waited until the casualty and damage reports had all come in. Once he knew the extent of his losses, he turned to the circle of staff officers around him. “Gentlemen, the critical moment has arrived. If we wait any longer there’ll be no need to ask Atlan for help. Have you any logical objections to our sending out a distress call?”

“I’d have done it 24 hours ago,” replied Bell calmly. “Our losses are frightening. The fact that we’ve shot down more than 2000 Druuf ships doesn’t stretch our chances at all. Nobody has any objections!”

Without a word Rhodan went to the Communications Central. It was the most critical moment in the history of the human race. Perry Rhodan, First Administrator of the Solar Empire, now had to reveal the location of the Earth, which until now had been kept a secret by every possible means available.

The hypercom contact had already been set up on a standby basis for some time, so now within 4 minutes the communication was established. Atlan’s face was clearly visible. The vast distance of 34000 light-years made no difference to the hypercom frequencies.

“So it’s come to this?” asked the Arkonide gravely. “I’ve been watching the attack for hours, via 5 robot cruisers standing near Capella. Do you

want my help? If so you have to realize that I can't keep my promise much longer."

In an almost broken voice, Rhodan replied. "We are asking for the support of the Greater Imperium. Atlan, we're being attacked by approximately 8000 Druuf ships. With my own resources I can probably hold the front for another 24 hours. Then they'll be moving in on Mars, Terra and Venus."

"The pertinent mobilization programming has been prepared. It appears to me that these monsters are throwing in all they've got in order to pin down the Arkonide forces at the main discharge zone. I'll send you everything I can spare. In about 10 or 12 hours the fleet will arrive there. Do our agreed recognition signals still stand?"

"Without exception. I'll communicate them to the Terranian commanders. Our IFF equipment will be programmed accordingly."

After the Arkonide had cut off the connection, Rhodan continued to sit in front of the blank viewscreen for some time. He seemed to feel the eyes of his staff officers on the back of his neck.

"Don't try asking us if we think you're a traitor," said someone, "or you're going to be in trouble with *me!*"

Rhodan turned to see Reginald Bell standing there in grim, stubborn loyalty. The other men exchanged glances, until he replied: "No . . . we're beyond that now. Good Lord, how simple it was! In a single radio communication I have snuffed out everything that we built up in 70 years. From now on, Terra will be public knowledge; it will be open to friend or foe. It will begin a new epoch for us."

"I'm glad, sir," declared Marshal Freyt. "We couldn't have remained hidden much longer, anyway."

6.

WHEN MUTANTS ENTER THE RING

Allan D. Mercant, chief of Solar Intelligence, had opened the briefing session at 13:30 standard time in the large crew wardroom of the light cruiser *CALIFORNIA*.

Present were all crew members of the ship and the special commandoes of the secret Mutant Corps. Perry Rhodan was missing because he had other tasks to take care of. These preparations for sending the mutants into action came under the heading of Intelligence operations.

The Solar System was engaged in a raging battle for the survival of Terra. All humanity had been forced to take up arms. In the large mess hall, silence reigned.

Mercant summarized the situation: "Events have indicated that you, ladies and gentlemen, are not able to threatened the attackers in spite of your paranormal capabilities. This is a wide-open conflict that hasn't anything to do with your functions as capable agents – thus far. Just the 3 teleporters among you would be far too ineffective with the old system of teleporting nuclear demolition bombs on board enemy ships. While you would be operating like that on a ship by ship basis, in the meantime we could be plunged into disaster. Pucky has already tried this system and has succeeded in two instances. On his third teleport jump he missed his target and was almost killed."

A thin little voice spoke up in the background as the mousebeaver joined in. "That crazy Druuf stepped on the gas just as I was concentrating," he complained. "I came close – very close – but that never happened to me before."

"It would happen again and again. Considering such a concentration of space vessels of every kind, mutant action of this nature has become useless. So for that reason I want you to stick to your own sphere of operations. Leave the actual battle to the spaceships that were designed for it."

Mercant interrupted himself to signal a greeting to the Administrator, who had just entered the mess hall. Perry Rhodan acknowledged curtly. Above his head hovered Harno, the strange ball-shaped creature.

"Are you all set? Marshall, do you think you can handle this?"

Marshall's tall figure separated itself from the crowd of crew members. "All set, sir. We'll give it a try. I realize that telepaths and other colleagues in my field can hardly be effective in open warfare."

"Those are the words of a wise man I know who has expressed that fact for many years," said Rhodan. "His name is Atlan. For your information, I have asked for his help. He will send us all the ships he can spare. Nevertheless, I don't want to leave anything untried. In 10 minutes the *DRUSUS* is going to withdraw from the front and Col. Tiffloor will follow with the *CALIFORNIA*. At a prescribed place I'm going to generate a ring-field for you and you'll be able to penetrate the Druuf universe as you have in the past. I want you to take full advantage of the cruiser's extra acceleration capacity. Make contact with the Hades base. Pucky can attempt to reach Ernst Ellert, who seems to be in trouble. Make a thrust into the Siamed System and determine whether or not the space station exists that Rous has informed us about. If that structure is actually a flying power plant that they're using to generate a synthetic discharge cone, then do what you think is necessary. Tiffloor, you and Marshall will work hand in hand together. You pilot the *CALIFORNIA* and Marshall will apply the mutants to the situation accordingly. At all costs you must try to destroy that station. There should be plenty of possibilities for you to do it because your capabilities are tailor – made for such an operation. You may not expect any assistance from me. I have my hands full right here. So keep the fact fully in mind that you are strictly on your own. I can't even give you support with the transmitters. All available special ship's equipment is urgently needed for rescuing the wounded. We're transferring the crews of crippled ships into other undamaged vessels."

"So you can see how difficult our situation is. I will not use the word 'desperate', not just yet – but it's very likely that things will be very acute in the immediate future."

After a slight pause, Rhodan continued. "We are all human beings. We all have a common home which we simply refer to as the Earth. Pucky and Harno belong to us. After all, we do not regard other forms of intelligence to be monstrosities, provided they are not malevolent. Nobody can do anything about his outward bodily appearance and form."

"Thank you!" chirped Pucky from the background. His large incisor tooth was gleaming.

"I wasn't talking about you in particular," said Rhodan, smiling. "You're not the only little monster around, you know."

It served to relieve the tension among the men who were listening. It

seemed as though Rhodan had just broken a spell.

“You should understand that you are going on a difficult mission. If everything goes as we hope it will, you will be cutting off the Druuf supply base from their fighting ships. That would be half the battle. Naturally there would still be the problem of getting rid of the enemy fleets that are still in our own universe. But that isn’t your worry. See if you can destroy this mysterious space station. This is war! If you have to attack with nuclear weapons, just keep in mind that Mankind is fighting for its life. That’s all I have to say. Are there any more questions?”

Rhodan looked up at the wall clock. Marshall raised a question about the duty assignment of Harno, the televidic creature.

“Harno stays here,” Rhodan decided. “I urgently need his gifts so that I can make best use of the teletransmitter on board the *DRUSUS*. I’m using it to attack the leading Druuf ships.”

After that, the Chief of the Solar Empire went back to the flagship, to which the 100-meter hull of the *CALIFORNIA* was clinging like a barely noticeable protuberance.

Five minutes later the cruiser freed itself from the grip of the magnetic mooring beams. The *DRUSUS* picked up speed and went into transition. It was the only ship in the Solar Fleet that was still equipped with a special warp generator for producing a ring-field. Behind her the *CALIFORNIA* also plunged into hyperspace. After a wide jump, both ships rematerialized near the blockade front, which was about 8300 light-years removed from the Earth.

A short 2 light-hours distance from them the combined Arkonide fleet was fighting with the Druufs who were still pushing through the discharge rift. It was evident that the aliens were trying everything possible to pin down the Arkonide forces here. It was further noticeable that entire squadrons were being pulled from the front, which gave assurance to Rhodan that Atlan had already put out the necessary orders for helping Terra.

Nobody knew as yet that he was behind the robot Brain. His instructions were issued over the recognized frequency band that was used by the Brain, so they were obeyed without question.

The *CALIFORNIA* held a position at a distance of 100 km behind the *DRUSUS* while matching its full-powered braking maneuvers. Once the flagship had come to a stop, the smaller ship cautiously drew alongside. Rhodan appeared on the telecom screen.

“Well done. We’re just in the right spot. If you penetrate the Druuf

universe from this position you should come out near the Siamed System. In your further actions you have to keep in mind that extra-dimensional points of reference are different from ours. Don't beat your brains out over the fact that you'll be discovering the space station of the planet Druufon, even though the discharge cone it's generating is somewhere near the Earth about 6300 light-years from there. These are hyper-mechanics of another time-plane and don't apply to the ordinary concept of distances. Here are some final particulars:

"If you are successful we'll know it when that funnel gets wiped out. In that case I'll come back here with the *DRUSUS*, build a new warp ring and pick you up. If your attack misfires or you find that the existence of the assumed power station is erroneous, land the cruiser at the Hades base and wait there for further communications. In that case I'll try to pull you out by using one of the Fleet's transmitter ships. Everything understood? OK, then let's get started."

* * *

Col. Julian Tifflor had an unpleasant sensation near his kidneys when he saw the strange apparition of energy starting to form in front of his fast cruiser. He stood almost at attention before the viewscreens while he waited for the completion of the technical miracle that the scientists on board the *DRUSUS* were producing.

At the moment he was thinking back to the first mission he had ever flown for Rhodan. At that time he had been assigned to the task of playing a trick on the Galactic Traders. He recalled that he had been a mere youngster then. His classmates had been shocked when he had been yanked right out of final exams at the Academy. A Terranian surgeon had then proceeded to plant a micro-apparatus in his body – a tracing signal transmitter which he still carried inside of him close to his kidneys.

Now here he was again on a special mission for Rhodan. Close ahead of the *CALIFORNIA* the portal was taking form – a sort of transitional field which served to coordinate and equalize the energy components of two space-time dimensions. In the center of the dark void appeared a ring of light that was just 300 meters in diameter. What lay beyond it could not be described in a few words.

Lines of tension came into Tifflor's lean face which had remained astonishingly young. His memories faded. The predominant thought now was that the Earth was at stake in what he had to do.

John Marshall stood behind him. As a member of the Mutant Corps, he had been one of his first associates. In his eyes Tiffloor could not detect any hint of the telepath's feelings.

"John, we ought to wish each other the best. I was just thinking back to old times."

"Same here, Tiff," replied Marshall quietly. "Do you realize we should have been dead long ago? It's ironic to think that we were given the bio cell-shower treatment on Wanderer to give us a temporary reprieve from the aging process – only to face this. Tiff, this could turn out to be our last mission."

"Takeoff is go!" boomed Rhodan's voice from the loudspeaker. "Move it! What are you still waiting for? Do you know what kind of power this thing is eating up?"

Tiffloor gave the required commands. With gently thrumming engines the Earth's most modern cruiser glided toward the light-ring. A minor course correction brought it exactly into the center of it. Within 30 meters of the strange portal, Tiffloor personally switched the controls to higher acceleration.

The weird iridescence brightened briefly and the vanished. The men felt a painful tug internally but the sensation passed quickly. Radio contact with the *DRUSUS* was cut off as though by a knife. Rhodan's last words could no longer be heard.

"Entrance maneuver completed, sir," the second officer announced. "We are on the other side."

Tiffloor turned again to the viewscreens, which were now bolstered by the teleoptics. Here was the dark and gloomy universe of the Druufs where all colors seemed to be overlaid with a deep red hue. It was the same impression Tiffloor had gotten from previous adventures here.

The *CALIFORNIA*'s tracking equipment came to life. There was evidence of heavy space traffic just 2 light-years away. In a similar manner the matter-sensors quickly revealed that the double star out there was the core of the Siamed System.

The giant dark red sun had a greenish-glowing companion. Since it was not unusual to find double stars with a family of planets, the initial discovery of these two suns had not appeared to be anything out of the ordinary. However, all that had changed when it was determined how eccentric the orbits of the system's 62 planets were. Some of them circled the principal red star exclusively, others orbited around both suns, and a third group

wound their way on apparently counter-rotational paths through the strong gravitational fields of the binary star.

For Julian Tiffloor, Siamed had always been a nightmare. Here nothing appeared to be normal and everything was fraught with incalculable factors. Added to this was a wavering time ratio throughout the entire universe, the extent of which was also unknown. Terranian cosmonautical science had restricted itself to a closer study of the Druufs' home system. What might be happening on the planets of all the many other stars was beyond Tiffloor's knowledge. He was quite content just to know how to get into this brooding red Hell.

The *CALIFORNIA* hovered in space without apparent motion.

"The ring-field is gone," announced the tracker, Tanaka Seiko.

Tiffloor ran a hand through his hair. For a moment there was a slightly confused expression on his youthful and beardless face. Somewhat disconcerted, he looked around. "So – we expected that. The *DRUSUS* is needed back at the front John, what do you suggest? Unfortunately nobody was able to give us any further instructions beyond this point."

Marshall stepped closer to the glowing viewscreens. The big panob gallery, usually filled with brightly shining familiar stars, now presented a scene that was depressing to human instinct. The cruiser's hypersensors rumbled incessantly. Only 2 light-years away, large fleet units were either maneuvering toward the naturally-created discharge rift or were already plunging into the narrow throat of the funnel-shaped formation. The vast number of ships developed such a volume of energy that it drowned out force radiations that were undoubtedly being generated by the exit funnel. Marshall asked for more information from the tracking center but nobody could give him any further details.

The only thing definite was that Rhodan's calculations had been exact. They were here close to the Druufs' home system where the mysterious space station was supposed to be located.

At present, however, it could not be seen. The distance was too great, the tremendous mass of the numerous planets caused too much interference and any residual echo traces coming through were effectively jammed by the full-powered engines of countless warships.

Marshall caught himself uttering such a hefty curse that it startled the female mutant Betty Toufry.

"Why John!" she admonished him reproachfully.

Pucky the mousebeaver let out a shrill guffaw. He seemed to be the only

living creature on board who was without a care. Obviously bored, the little fellow pattered into the middle of the Control Central. Placing his dainty hands on his hips, he comfortably supported himself on his wide, spoon-shaped beaver tail. "You could at least wait until *I'm* not present!" he declared indignantly.

"Look who's talking!" said the two-headed mutant, Ivan Goratschin, speaking from the head that was on his right side. The other head, known as Ivan the Elder, laughed amusedly.

Pucky's narrow mouseface twisted scornfully. His big ears turned to the 7½foot giant with the clumsy, green-scaled body. "Nobody asked for your opinion," he said. "On the other hand I have decided that . . ."

"You what?" interrupted Marshall.

". . . that we have no other choice but to jump into the system," he said, completing his sentence unperturbedly. "What else? Here we're completely isolated. There's no telepath on Hades and I don't advise using the hypercom. Ernst Ellert is a good telepath but he seems to be too tied up with this Druuf scientist. The last time I already mentioned how much Onot keeps resisting Ellert's mental influence. So there's just no other choice but to . . ."

"What?" interjected Marshall again.

"I don't like to be interrupted all the time," chirped the mousebeaver angrily. "Some people have their nerve! Now may I *please* continue?"

Marshall waved his hands resignedly and Tiffnor sat down in the nearest chair, also giving up.

"That's better," said Pucky, mollified. "I suggest that we make an advance of at least 10 light-hours. From that point I'll probably be able to contact Ellert. If necessary, John, Betty, Ishy Matsu and I will have to make a combined telepathic signal, and that's bound to reach him. He should know where that station can be found. Maybe we can drop the idea entirely of contacting Rous, because it's dangerous to send radio to the 13th planet. If that flying power plant blows up he'll know soon enough that we've left our calling card. Well, what do you think of it?"

Marshall was cleaning his nails, lost in thought.

"Hahem-m!" The telepath, Ishy Matsu, cleared her throat reprovingly.

John shoved his hands into his trouser pockets and looked toward the CALIFORNIA's commander. "Tiff, what do you think? Does the little rascal have something there or are you toying around with something

else?”

“I don’t see any better way. There are still other alternatives but they’re more involved and equally as dangerous. I think we should risk it I have to find the source of the discharge cone whether it’s being generated on a planet or on a space station. All I can hope is that our agents haven’t made an error. But if that crossover funnel turns out to be due to natural causes we can turn back with a clear conscience.”

Marshall’s face became inscrutable. Tiff became uneasy when he looked into those dark eyes. They seemed to burn with an inner fire.

“Not even then,” said the Chief of the Mutant Corps emphatically. “From Atlan’s account of the destruction of ATLANTIS we’ve learned that he was able to cause similar energy formations to collapse by shooting at them with converted impulse engines. In such a case we’ll be governed accordingly and do what the Arkonides have effectively demonstrated 10,000 years ago. OK, should we get going?”

Julian Tiffloor got up. He had understood completely. John Marshall was unshakably convinced that the uncanny energy phenomena would have to be put to an end in one way or another. The mutants went back into the mess room because they had nothing to do with flying the ship.

A half hour later the calculations for transition were completed. Tiffloor had them rechecked 3 times until all uncertainty values were levelled off to a maximum possible exactitude.

By human standards the *CALIFORNIA* had to hit its destination point right ‘on the nose’ when it emerged from hyperspace, which seemed to demonstrate the same laws in the Druuf plane as in the Einstein continuum. When they had first penetrated this second time-zone the hyper-dimensional factors had proved to be stable within themselves.

Tiffloor made an announcement over the ship’s P.A. “Transition will occur at about 6 minutes after acceleration start. Spacesuits for all hands. Combat mutant detail, put on your Arkonide battle gear. Teleporters may have to go into action sooner than the others. If the chance comes up, let’s not miss it by being asleep at the switch. Marshall, see the weapons control officer. Get your issue of prepared micro-bombs and divide them up among your people. Whatever happens, this thing has to go like clockwork.”

The light cruiser came to life. It picked up speed under full power thrust of the engines. The 150man crew began to sense the initial buildup of tension which was always a part of going into action. This was seen in the fact that all necessary announcements or reports began to be short-lipped and to the

point.

The G-shock absorbers took up the tremendous inertial forces of the acceleration surge. No one on board the *CALIFORNIA* sensed that they were hurtling through the alien universe at a rate of 1000 km/sec.

For Julian Tiffloor the flight characteristics of the special ship were very gratifying. If the Druuf weapon technology was superior, at least they had a spacer that no Druuf ship could match in terms of speed and acceleration. And to this was added the assurance that the Druuf fighting units were hampered by the difference of time-rate here, which only enabled them to move at half the speed of light, that is, in their own normal continuum. It was another story, of course, when the aliens used their linear transition technique of extra-dimensional travel. In that case they were again superior.

Within a few minutes the spherical hull of the light cruiser began to vibrate strenuously. The propulsion units had been operating for some time now with the supercharger injection wide open, which held the acceleration at maximum.

10 seconds prior to transition, Tiffloor activated the closed circuit video intercom. "We're going into the jump, John, are you all set?"

"OK, we're ready. Here's luck!"

Then came the pains of dematerialization which seemed to pull at the very marrow of their bones. They were all accustomed to it, yet every hypertransition was always a torture to the entire body.

The *CALIFORNIA* vanished from the normal Druuf continuum. Due to the hyper-compensator, no shockwaves were propagated. Thus the prospects were good for making a surprise appearance in the Siamed System.

7.

THE BATTLE FOR TERRA

The 13th planet's librational fluctuations were a cause for concern. It was apparent that its impossible-seeming orbital path was bringing it closer and closer to the giant red sun. By astronomical standards it was not very hot but for crew members of Hades, the Terranian base, it was like an atomic oven whose blazing tongues of hydrogen flame threatened at any moment to vaporize the planet's surface.

Hades was a so-called orbital rotation body, meaning that only one portion of its surface always faced the sun. On the day side the average temperatures exceeded 340° Fahrenheit. The eternal night side had long since surrendered its last traces of heat to outer space. There the temperatures approached Absolute zero.

The base had been built in the 'twilight' zone between the day and night hemispheres. It was roughly 80 km in extent but its spread-out features were subject to such changes that its configuration was never very constant.

Capt. Marcel Rous looked at the special wristwatch of his heavy spacesuit. The air-conditioning blower in the back of his oversized pressure helmet drowned out any faint sounds from the outside. Hades had turned another fraction of a degree. Apparently the gravitational influence of the nearby giant sun had such a powerful effect on the Mars-sized planet that the former twilight belt was slipping into the direct range of the solar rays.

Rous looked across at the Hope Mountains with an increased uneasiness. During the first Terranian visitation of this world, a camouflaged station had been built into the mountainside and in the course of ensuing months it had been expanded and improved.

It had grown brighter. Deep red shafts of light touched the craggy rim of the low cordillera and fanned upward into the dark sky. It would not be long now before this semi-twilight region would be like a smoldering melting pot. Rous drew back slowly behind the protection of a steep tower of rock. It was high time that he left the unpleasant outside world to seek the more favorable climate of rooms inside the stronghold.

About 1 km behind him the first evaporated wisps of frozen gases were rising. There was a notable increase in temperature. In a few hours this area would be visited by a considerable storm of vaporizing gases.

Rous decided to leave his observation post but just once more he bent back his upper torso in order to elevate his field of vision. Breathing deeply he looked outward into the star-spangled depths of space, which began practically at the planet's surface. These mere traces of gas could not be considered to be an actual atmosphere.

Out there Rous could see what the men in the *CALIFORNIA* had not been able to discover. In the midst of the empty void was the glowing dark red mark of Druuf technology. It began as a thin, tubular formation somewhere near the 17th planet and stretched away into immeasurable distances. When Rous leaned back to his limit he could plainly see the beginnings of the funnel.

With a grunt the captain reached out for a support and got up. The heavy suit was cumbersome. In spite of the negligible pull of 0.35 gravs, every movement was an effort. On his mind was the fact that it had been some days now since he had been in contact with the Terranian communications cruiser. Any hour now he expected a transmitter ship to arrive outside the nearby discharge zone.

At this far advanced secret base, Rous felt somewhat isolated and lost. Maj. Matsuro, the commander of the *NIPPON*, had been the last one to give him any news of happenings on the faraway home front. He had spoken of a surprise Druuf attack and then he and his ship had vanished.

Rous had a graphic vision of what must be going on in the Sol system at present. He cursed the fate that tied him to this infernal planet. Disgruntled, he looked once more at the nearby mountain range. The gaseous wind became stronger and the angle of the sun's rays intensified the heat and glare. If he had his druthers, he reflected, he would leave this post within the very next hour.

While preoccupied with these thoughts he was surprised by the sudden crackling of his helmet receiver. Lt. Kagus was on the radio. "Hello, Marcel – you still alive out there?"

"Thanks for your kind concern," Rous answered irritably. "If I could, I'd junk this lousy rock. Libration's increasing. In 3 or 4 hours it'll be about 360° out here in front of the cave entrance."

"Sounds real comfy. All the more reason you should get here on the double. I think we just traced a transition jump by a Terranian ship. At any rate it wasn't the usual warp shock and it wasn't the kind of flicker the Druufs put out when they make a hop. It's pretty likely that somebody's just gone into hyper under a frequency damper."

"Now you tell me!" yelled Rous.

"What do you mean now? I only just opened my yap."

The captain got under way. In 10 minutes he reached the narrow manlock that was so perfectly camouflaged that it could have only been discovered by accident. He waited impatiently as the armorplate hatch swung leisurely back to reveal the small airlock behind it. When the hiss of incoming air became audible, he hit the magnetic release of his helmet ring and his pressurized internal air escaped like a small explosion. Without saluting the guards at the inner hatch, Rous ran down the passage that lay beyond. The stronghold's tracking and communications rooms were besieged by the men of the base crew.

To the left of the area were the cavernous chambers where the matter transmitters had been installed. With this equipment it had always been possible to establish a direct contact with the fast ships of the Solar Fleet, without any necessity for making a dangerous breakthrough. The matter transmitters operated through hyper-dimensional channels. When two of them were exactly attuned to each other a contact could be made with practically no possibility of interference from existing influences of the normal environment. Once there had been a mis-channeling but these side effects had since been overcome.

Somebody activated the sliding panel and Rous stumbled into the room, where he flopped into a chair, exhausted.

Lt. Kagus sat tensely at the vernier tracker. Without turning from the console, he said: "They've emerged into normal space again. I'll bet my head it's a Terranian ship. These flat curves are typical. Somebody's jumped through under a residual energy screen. Here, see for yourself."

Rous shook off his cumbersome spacesuit and let it fall to the floor. The wave pattern was indeed typical of what they hoped for. They could not be picking up the wave shocks of a regular warp. Only the residual traces of an operating compensator had come through, which the highly sensitive special instruments were registering.

"Who can it be?" asked Rous. "Do you have any idea? First of all, how did they get into the Druuf plane? If they had penetrated the discharge front we'd have known about it from all the fireworks. For days now the Druufs have stopped all penetration by that route. They've set up whole fleets across the entrance zone."

He strained closer to the RE-tracker but saw no further impulse patterns.

Kagus took off his head phones. "If I'm not mistaken, the folks back home

remembered the old ring-field generator. They can also get in here with one of those, you know. Maybe we should get ready for a field overlap at any time.”

Rous stared searchingly at his friend. “Field overlap? Does that mean you expect a collapse of the exit cone?”

“Right you are. If the Chief has put any of his boys through the warp-ring and brought them here into the Druuf plane, you can bet they’re no normal men. I’m thinking of a mutant commando outfit. The last thing we did was to tell the *NIPPON*’s commander about the weird formation that’s built up in our neighborhood. Of course I don’t see how a funnel in this area could be used for a surprise attack on the Earth but anyway there’s always that possibility. At any rate we can assume that Maj. Matsuro wouldn’t have kept the information to himself. That’s why it seems logical that Perry Rhodan must have decided to take action.”

He was tapping the plastic readout strip of the sensor with his fingernail Marcel Rous had become pensive.

“Let’s wait and see what happens. If our people have arrived here they’d hesitate to put out a radio call. The danger of being traced is too great. Anyway, we should prepare for trouble. Under the circumstances they may be forced to land on Hades. Sgt. Eicksen, you get your group into the transmitter room. If the machines give a green signal I want to be notified at once.”

Thus they had covered the basics of the situation. The small crew of the agent headquarters on Hades was aware of what was going on in outer space – up to a point. What they did not suspect was the scope of the Druuf invasion. In their own concept the new force cone must have come out into Einstein space somewhere near the naturally generated discharge zone. But it emerged near the Earth; and therein lay a slight difference.

As Rous and Kagus were leaving the tracking station, the captain stopped at the door. “Do you really buy that theory of yours – mutant commandoes?”

Kagus grinned. “You ought to know the experts in High Command better than I do. Don’t you think they would have evaluated our report immediately? In any case, just a few minutes ago a Terranian ship made a hyperjump. That had to be inside the Druuf universe or we wouldn’t have been able to detect it. If our people locate that new cone, we can get set for anything to happen.”

“If they’re not shot down before then,” answered Rous gravely. “The

Siamed System is swarming with all shapes and sizes of fighting ships.”

* * *

The position within 10 light-hours of the Siamed System was very temporary. After determining that they had not been spotted by the Druufs, Tiffloor had immediately prepared for another transition jump.

During this operation the heavy flight traffic among the 62 planets came to the aid of the *CALIFORNIA*. It was apparently impossible for all ground stations to sift out the traces of the relatively small cruiser in the massive presence of their own hard-driving ships.

The new funnel had not yet been sighted. In the course of the feverish search, one of the scientists of the mission team hit upon the right idea. It was plain to see that an energy trace of this nature was prohibited just now by the heavy interference effects of their surroundings. However, considering the tremendous size of such a funnel it should have become visible before now in their optical instruments.

They were still wondering if they had emerged in the right place when suddenly the aforementioned physicist swore aloud in a startling manner. “How long has the funnel been there? Just a few days, isn’t that right? And how fast is light in Druuf space? Exactly 150 thousand km per second. According to that it’s no wonder we haven’t seen this apparition yet. Its light hasn’t reached us yet, gentlemen! Fly farther ahead and it’ll show itself – you’ll have proof of how slow we were in finally coming to our senses!”

This was actually the reason for Tiffloor’s decision to make the second transition jump.

Now, following the second maneuver, all was revealed. The big viewscreens of the panob gallery couldn’t encompass the full extent of the light phenomenon. Tiffloor estimated its height to be in the range of 10 billion kilometers. At the mouth of the cone where the transitional effects began and the thing faded out it must have been about 20 million km in diameter.

These were tremendous measurements, yet in astronomical terms they were still small and insignificant. At any rate the zone’s diameter was sufficient to permit the passage of entire fleet formations without hindrance or danger into the Einstein continuum.

The tracking and sensor instruments of the *CALIFORNIA* were reacting uninterruptedly to the new environment. The ship had emerged from

hyperspace near the 15th planet. Planet 16, the home world of the Druufs, was just 250 million km away. The gleaming disc of the planet, named Druufon, now appeared about the size of a fist under magnification of the trans-light mass detectors. They were fairly close to the tubular end of the synthetic exit cone which had already had such fateful consequences for the Earth.

At least Tiffloor hoped that the phenomenon was due to artificial causes. They still saw no sign of the reported space station. Tiff was thinking of calling the Hades base for more information but it was still too dangerous because a radio call could betray them more easily than the presence of the cruiser itself.

The thundering super power of the engines shook the hull in every seam. They were putting on all the brakes in order to cut down their entrance velocity. Once at a standstill they hoped to pick up more specific tracking and sensor data. Also it was an old rule of thumb that a motionless body was considerably more difficult to make out than a ship that was moving rapidly. Tiff was fairly certain he wouldn't get away with a continued approach flight for long.

Three minutes later the *CALIFORNIA* came to a relative state of rest. While the ship hovered motionlessly in space, the tracking experts redoubled their efforts in search of the space station. However, the incoming echo traces and radiation pickups always came from Druuf ships that were either taking off or landing. The 16th planet appeared to be a fleet base and stronghold of major proportions. The closer one came to the source of these disturbances, the more indistinct the individual traces became.

"Keep trying," Tiffloor told them. "As long as we remain undetected we have time. As for what may be happening on the home front I'd rather not think about it."

He wanted to contact John Marshall but changed his mind when Ivan Goratschin told him that Marshall was busy. So he contented himself with observing the mutant chiefs strange operation by means of the video intercom.

On board the battle-ready and heavily armed cruiser, which was a monument to human inventiveness and technological advancement, a strange assembly had gathered. The members of the Mutant Corps who were gifted with telepathy stood in a close group and held each other's hands. These were Pucky, John Marshall, Betty Toufry and Ishy Matsu. Their faces and staring eyes were devoid of expression. No one was present in the room but themselves because it was vitally important that no

extraneous sounds should interrupt their combined concentration. Only the pickup cameras of the closed video system were present but they operated silently.

Marshall functioned as ‘spokesman’ for their combined mentalities. Working as human conductors the other 3 mutants merely placed their own powers at his disposal, which Marshall not only combined with his own transmission but also used as an inner amplifier of his thoughts.

The contact was established after 10 minutes of very intensive telepathic broadcasting. In this case the distance itself was now a negligible factor. Through a unique ability, Ellert’s personality had taken possession of the Druuf scientist Onot. However, inasmuch as he took so long to answer the urgent and powerful mental call of the mutant group it became obvious that he was in some kind of serious trouble.

Marshall had continued to repeat the fortified call until it finally produced a response. Somewhere in John’s subconsciousness a faint and distant voice became discernible: “*Who’s calling? . . . John?*”

“You’re in trouble . . . we can feel it. We’ve built a mind pool here. Can we give you support?”

“No, but make this short. It’s taking everything I’ve got to keep a grip on Onot’s rebellious personality. Did you come because of the new funnel formation?”

Marshall confirmed as much. He and the other mutants had to strain against their own growing fatigue in order to strengthen the weakening telepathic impulses.

“We’re looking for the space station you reported, Ellert.”

“It’s orbiting Druufon at a distance of 3 million km. Destroy it. The Leading Druuf scientists are on board. They’ve put everything into it that high rank or intelligence can offer in order to keep that funnel going. The equipment they’re using was developed from Onot’s time-stasis machine. The station is the only one of its kind. If it’s destroyed along with the brain trust out there, there’s no way they’ll ever build another generator platform. Onot has been placed in a kind of protective custody. He and I are down here on the planet. Attack, or it will be too late!”

With that the connection broke off abruptly. No matter how hard Marshall tried to regain the contact, Ellert was heard from no more.

Tifflor was at a high state of agitation. When the weird fixity of the mutants’ eyes began to relax, the colonel hastily grabbed his microphone. “What is it? What did he say? Come on – out with it! We can be discovered

at any moment!”

Marshall summarized: “The station is orbiting around Druufon. Distance: 3 million km. That’s why you couldn’t track it because the planet is so big and has been eclipsing it. Ellert cut off all of a sudden. I’m afraid he’s in deep trouble. We should make an attempt . . .”

“No!”

Marshall was startled by the sound of Tiffloor’s voice. When he looked up searchingly at the viewscreen he saw that the frank, youthful countenance of the commander had changed. This was the hidden but genuine Tiffloor, who was capable of unsuspected harshness when the occasion demanded it.

“Rescuing Ellert is a task for a separate mission. We aren’t equipped for it and we don’t have the time. John, I’m making a jump. Get ready for action. I have a hunch we don’t have another minute to lose. Get in here to Central with your 3 teleporters.”

Tiffloor cut the connection. His hard refusal still burned on the tip of his tongue. Secretly conscience – bitten, he looked around him for reactions but found none.

While the short transition was being calculated, Marshall appeared along with Pucky, Tako Kakuta and the dark-skinned Ras Tschubai. Except for Marshall, all of them were teleporters. They were wearing Arkonide combat spacesuits. The suits generated defense screens which made normal space armor unnecessary. Each one had a wide shoulder holster in which was contained ball-sized, black-gleaming objects – the ultimate weapons of destruction.

Three minutes prior to the new transition, the *CALIFORNIA* was detected in spite of its built-up screen: The duty officer in the Com Room was heard from. “Lt. Instedt reporting, sir. We’re picking up impacts on the hyper band – intensity range 7. Now we have 3 different impacts, now 5. Their tracking beams have us, sir.”

Then from the tracking room: “Shockwave echoes with flat curves. Several ships going into hyper-dimensional space. Contact lost. Warp configuration shows linear propulsion. Over and out.”

Tiffloor was suddenly the epitome of calmness. He skipped running a recheck on the jump coordinates. As the last strips of data spewed forth from the P-calculators the *CALIFORNIA*’s big engines roared to life. The cruiser shot forward.

The high acceleration hurled them away from their holding position like a bullet. By the time the tracking room reported five Druuf ships the

CALIFORNIA had already put several million kilometers behind her. But the transition coordinates were not quite ready. Automatic programming of the hyper-field generators took its own time.

In the viewscreens linked to the outboard opticals the previously clear reproduction of the stars was blurring and fading. They were approaching the relative speed of light. As the thundering of the engine compartments indicated that the supercharger injectors had automatically started operating, Tiffloor knew that in the realm of normal flight there was nothing that could overtake him now. The Druuf ships didn't have this much acceleration capacity nor could they achieve the Earthly version of speol. Tiffloor figured he still had 5 minutes to spare so he turned almost indifferently to the teleporters.

"Now here's the plan, so listen carefully. It's impossible for the *CALIFORNIA* to attack the space station with weapons fire – we'd be shot down before we could try it. I'm going to rematerialize within 3 million km of the main planet of the system. After that I'll have about one minute to locate the satellite base and blast toward it on full power."

"As soon as it's in our viewscreens and you align yourselves with it, make your jumps and don't forget those bombs. Immediately after you disappear I'll make a short blind hyperjump, which will move me out of the action. I'll need 5 minutes after reentry to brake to a stop. Then another 5 minutes for calculating the return transition. But on that trip I'm not going to rev up to entry speed again. Instead, I'll try a little Russian roulette and attempt a standing jump which should bring me exactly in front of the space station."

"If I make it you'll get a short hyper-blip from me over the radio. Then you concentrate on teleporting back on board. All told you'll have from 10 to 12 minutes for messing around inside that station. There's no way to get back to you sooner than that. Once you hear my call blip, however, you'll have just 30 seconds to make it to the ship. Is that clear? Any questions?"

Pucky spoke up. "Why not hang around a few secs until we've dropped our little love notes? At the most, maybe only a minute."

"Our neck's going to be hanging out for a minute, as it is, until I can locate the station. If I give those Druuf weapons officers another 60 seconds to draw a bead on me the *CALIFORNIA* will be hanging around, alright – as a miniature sunball! We'll stay with the plan. You make your jump, I take a hyper-dive, then come back and send you a call beep. Remember – 30 seconds is the time you'll have to pile on board. I'll not wait a second longer before blasting out. Now – can you do it?"

Tako Kakuta smiled. "I'd call that a real clear piece of instant planning, sir. We'll make it."

"We're all set!" agreed Pucky somewhat plaintively. "We'll last your 12 minutes."

Immediately thereafter, new Druuf ships were detected. This time the enemy was pursuing the *CALIFORNIA* by means of the much faster linear trans-light propulsion method.

"By now the whole security fleet is alerted," observed Tiffloor quietly. "Hang on for transition. I wish we had all these Druufon fireworks behind us."

Just as the pursuers made a sudden reappearance in the normal continuum of the Druuf universe, the *CALIFORNIA* launched itself at light-speed into hyper-dimensions. The raybeams that groped out after them expended their shots without effect.

At the same time the tracking station on Hades registered another transition.

Capt. Rous went on red alert, as did the sentinel ships near the space station. It only took a few moments for the just-vanished cruiser to cover the short transition of 250 million km.

When it became visible again it also appeared on the viewscreens of the Druuf ships.

* * *

Oddly enough the projected weapon beams were also visible! What had been normally impossible in Einstein space because of the lack of matter had become a phenomenal reality here. True to the local time-ratio mechanics, the bundled streaks of deadly energy travelled at only half the speed of light, so it was relatively easy for Tiffloor to dodge them and still maintain his course.

But how much longer could their luck hold out? Tiffloor was well aware of the old saw that too many hounds meant death for the hare. He flew the *CALIFORNIA* on manual override, which enabled him to make evasive maneuvers without any nav computations and thus escape the increasing energy bolts.

The dull red space between the planets here was normally only sparsely relieved by a dark glimmer here and there but now it was interlaced with a jumbled filigree of the heaviest calibre thermo-discharges.

Apparently in such close proximity to the binary sun a large amount of cosmic dust had been captured and concentrated by the tremendous gravitational field. When Tiffloor issued orders to open fire, the stern gun positions of the Terranian ship spouted a flaming cascade of fireballs. In the course of 5 seconds two hits were made. The two resulting atomic explosions marked what was left of the two Druuf ships that had been on an exact approach toward the *CALIFORNIA*.

It had been simple to find the space station, much easier than expected. All they had to do was head for the tube-end of the funnel. The gleaming formation was exceptionally visible in the dark-brooding vault of space and they knew that where it began the orbiting power plant had to be located. There was no other possibility.

Tiffloor raced onward. The *CALIFORNIA*'s engines howled under full-power load. Two seconds prior to this the forward repulsion shields had cut in automatically. Owing to the surprisingly heavy concentration of interplanetary micro-particles in the central part of the system, some undesirable friction effects had been noted. The cruiser's leading hemisphere was already glowing dangerously when the projectors finally sprang into operation. They ionized the tiny particles and then repelled them magnetically from the flight path.

40 seconds of Tiffloor's predicted one-minute leeway had passed already. On the forward viewscreens a disc-shaped object appeared bright and clear. It was at least 8 km in diameter and 1.5 km thick. Just before the lapse of the planned one-minute time-span, it appeared that the security fleet had finally gotten their range. Very precise lead angles had been calculated so that now the first shot struck the defense screen.

It happened just 1 second prior to the planned action.

At the end of the minute, Tiffloor knew it was high time to go. A second shot sideswiped the defense screen and inside the cruiser there was a dull reverberation as though they were in the center of a resounding bell. The space station was still a good 50,000 km away.

"Jump!" yelled the commander but he was a fraction of a second too late.

The 3 teleporters knew that they could manage the remaining distance in spite of their heavy bomb load. Where they had just been standing was a rapidly vanishing swirl of shimmering air.

Simultaneously Tiffloor hit the transition commit lever. The *CALIFORNIA* disappeared into hyperspace just as 14 mighty thermo-beams crossed the spot where the ship would have been had it continued in normal flight.

Inside the long since alerted space station the Druuf scientists congratulated each other. It was obvious that a desperate attack by a suicide commando group had been repulsed since they had clearly seen how determinedly the enemy had sought to bring the station under fire. But the intruders had not managed to land a single shot. The funnel stood there the same as before.

It was just this attitude that Tiffloor had hoped to generate. Now all that was necessary was for the mutants to be able to operate unobserved. By human estimates it had to succeed. No one would imagine that 3 paranormal beings could have left a spaceship going at almost the speed of light without using a lifeboat or some other small vehicle.

As the *CALIFORNIA* promptly rematerialized, the navigation officers began to compute the return transition even while the engines went into emergency retro-braking under a fuel-consuming mode of medium super-charging. Almost in the same second, 3 mutants arrived at their destination.

* * *

Ras Tschubai had the misfortune of landing right in the middle of a high-tension power room between a number of free-standing transformers. Blinded by the incessantly-crackling discharge lightnings and the steady glare of the power conductor beams, he staggered back with a loud groan.

His body was still racked with the pains of rematerialization. It had only been noted at the last moment that the whole surface of this space station was encased in a bell-shaped energy barrier. Apparently it had energy characteristics which were alien and antagonistic to non-Druuf type matter or flesh and blood. Tschubai had clearly sensed a resistance as he broke through.

He crouched down in a protected corner and was very careful not to come too close to the current transmission beams. Beyond the fixed metal bulkhead thundered the power machinery. Judging by the noise there were probably giant high-powered nuclear piles in there hooked up to converter banks. In this respect the Druufs operated no differently than humans except that some other catalysis process was involved in the stabilization of their nuclear power generation.

Ras acted without delay. Carefully removing the heavy bomb from his shoulder harness, he checked his watch and then set the ignition timer. Taking the seconds into consideration which had already passed since his arrival, he set the running time for 15 minutes. The commando mission was being performed by 3 teleporters simultaneously in order to provide the

highest possible safety factor. Even if two of the bombs should be discovered and defused in time, the third one would be sufficient to destroy the space-going power plant in spite of its size.

From then on, Tschubai waited for the planned signal beep. His armband receiver was on. The allowed 30 seconds of grace must be used to good advantage because if he missed it there would be no way back.

Pucky and Tako Kakuta had been fortunate to land in some giant chambers where there were sufficient nooks and corners to provide ample concealment. Once they had landed inside the station their task was relatively simple. Naturally the big atomic piles and other power unit stations were remotely controlled. Only Pucky spotted a Druuf who was evidently going thin a monitoring passage.

In exactly 12.3 minutes the microcoms suddenly beeped the call signal. Simultaneously the mutants heard the angry thunder of energy cannons from the space station's defensive batteries. They teleported at once. When they acquired their physical status again they found themselves on board the Terranian cruiser, whose commander was in the process of maneuvering wildly to escape the crossfire.

The Druuf ships fired salvos in unison. When the *CALIFORNIA* took two hits and the screens collapsed due to exploding field projectors, Tiffloor decided on a hyperjump although the prescribed transition speed had not been reached. The pains of dematerialization were horrible, indicating that they had not made the transition as smoothly as under normal conditions.

The *CALIFORNIA* vanished into the 5th dimension. When they returned to normal space the colossal exit funnel had been extinguished. They found themselves on the outer perimeter of the Siamed System. Here where the sensors had formerly indicated the presence of the cone, now the trans-light equipment revealed a tremendous eruption of energy. Of course in the optical sense the original form of the funnel was still there but it was an illusion due to the half light-speed of Druuf space. For the same reason the stupendous sphere of exploding forces could not be observed with the senses because its light had not yet reached outward to the 62nd planet. Only the instantaneous sensor, working on a trans-light basis, was able to show that the synthetic young nova was no longer the exit funnel.

Ras Tschubai and Tako Kakuta struggled against nausea. Pucky had fallen unconscious. The accelerated hyperjump together with the effects of the former space station's barrier screen had resulted in a total depletion of their energies.

Tiffloor was beaming. He could report a successful mission. Now the only thing they had to worry about was getting out of the Druuf plane all in one piece.

Again the *CALIFORNIA* picked up speed and finally went into a proper transition. Exactly at the place where they were supposed to wait for the *DRUSUS* to produce the warp-ring, Tiffloor brought the cruiser to a halt. All machinery was shut down. Every piece of equipment whose radiation would have been able to betray their position was turned off. The swift cruiser from the Earth resembled a ghost ship.

The only thing still operating was a carefully shielded emergency power reactor, which supplied energy to the vernier tracker. With this instrument they could tell if they were being swept by echo pulses, thus warning them in case they were being tracked.

* * *

Three hours after the 5th attack wave the first remotely-controlled weapons detonated on the moons of Jupiter. A cruiser was hit accidentally and was so heavily damaged that it plunged into a formation of interceptors and destroyers that had been ready for takeoff.

In the Middle Sector of the front the battle raged with undiminished ferocity. The Solar Fleet losses were frightening and yet the Druufs had lost five times the number of ships in all classes and sizes.

The superbattleships were the backbone of the front lines. Especially the *DRUSUS*, using the teletransmitter. Its effectiveness was so terrible that wherever the colossal ship appeared in the face of the enemy a gaping hole would inevitably take the place of the leading phalanx of a Druuf attack force.

Two events occurred in rapid succession, 9 hours after the return of the flagship. A tracking-sensor operator had difficulty controlling his own voice when he announced that the discharge funnel near the Capella System had suddenly collapsed.

Perry Rhodan did not hear all the jubilation on board the Terranian ships but he took special note of the fact that his demoralized fighting forces swung back to the battle with renewed spirit and courage. The Druuf squadron that made an appearance near Mars was destroyed in just a few moments.

But the enemy still had too many ships to allow any guarantee of a Terranian victory. Rhodan put out a hypercom command, ordering a retreat

to the third and final defense line of the Solar Fleet. The scattered and widely dispersed units of all major classes were brought together there for a desperate last stand.

Then came the second and decisive event of the war.

Two seconds after the destruction of the fighting ship *OSAGE* under command of Col. Poskanov, the hypersensors on all Terranian ships went mad and virtually threatened to explode. Countless spaceships were hurtling out of hyperspace with astonishing speed. Atlan had been able to mobilize faster than expected. Only 9 hours after the distress call, 10,000 of some of the heaviest units of the Arkonide robot fleet arrived, including their major class superships. The entire force was under command of the Arkonide, Admiral Senekho, who made a businesslike exchange of recognition signals according to plan and then immediately threw all units into the Battle for Terra.

But 5 minutes later another contingent of some 4000 spaceships arrived, their hull configurations indicating that they belonged to the Springers. This was the first time in history that the Galactic Traders had flown unhindered into the Solar System – into that system which they had searched for so long and in vain.

“I am here by order of the Regent, Administrator,” rumbled the voice of an old bearded patriarch from the loudspeakers. “Cokaze is my name and I am the elder chief of my clan. Where are you hurting the most?”

Rhodan stood almost paralyzed before the viewscreens. The sinister face of the old clansman awakened in Rhodan all the years of resentment and opposition he had felt for the Springers. However, he managed in very reserved tones to give the wily chieftain the necessary tactical information. Almost simultaneously he withdrew his lighter units from the front, leaving only the superbattleships, regular heavy class ships and still-undamaged cruisers on the battle line.

The exhausted pilots of all interceptors and 3-man destroyers lost no time in making a high-speed retreat to their separate bases behind the lines. And from then on all the staff officers on board the *DRUSUS* had to do was observe the systematic destruction of the remaining 8000 Druuf ships.

It only took the inhuman Commander-in-Chief of the enemy forces about 15 minutes to evaluate the situation. As one ship after the other exploded, and as he saw that the collapse of the exit funnel had suddenly cut off his urgently needed reinforcements, he issued a general order. Just 3000 ships, the pitiful remains of a once gigantic invasion fleet, were able to flee into

the nether regions of a hyper-dimension.

A strange inversion of status occurred for the Solar System from one minute to the next. Whereas on the one hand it had been swept clean of one enemy, on the other hand now others were present who were equally not welcome.

Rhodan made contact with Admiral Senekho. The old man belonged to that minority group of Arkonides who had still retained a sufficiently active mentality to entrust them with command positions. As the Admiral's tired and wrinkled face appeared on the big viewscreen of the *DRUSUS*, Rhodan suppressed a secret smile. Senekho was the same officer who had supervised and checked out his commandoes disguised as Zalite spacers and assigned them to the ships of the Imperium. This had been on Naator, the great moon of the triclopes' planet Naat. That had only been a few weeks ago and yet it seemed to Rhodan as though years had intervened since then.

"You've come a long way, Terranian," Senekho began. "It appears to me that you and the Regent get along well together. Your enemies have fled. There was nothing else to expect. I have been instructed to follow your command. What is there left to do?"

It was short and to the point. In contrast to other members of his race who were afflicted with a mental and psychic degeneration, Senekho seemed to have considerably outstanding qualities.

"Nothing more, but thanks. If you need fresh water, provisions or other items you are free to land at any of the bases of the Solar Imperium."

"Imperium?" Senekho repeated the word in some wonderment and then laughed. "That's quite a way of putting it, isn't it? Do you refer to this pitiful little star with its handful of dwarf planets?"

Reginald Bell reddened with anger and stared wrathfully at the viewscreen but in spite of this typical Arkonide arrogance Rhodan refused to be perturbed.

He answered calmly: "Quite so, Admiral – Imperium. You must have heard enough about us by now to be able to realize that the size of a Solar System is not necessarily any indication of the qualities and capabilities of its inhabitants. However, that wasn't what I wished to discuss."

"And what is?" Senekho leaned forward with new interest so that his face became larger on the screen."

"According to the covenant I have made with the Regent of Arkon, I was assured protection for the Imperium. How does it happen then that 4000

Springer ships have suddenly appeared in my system?"

Senekho smiled. "I have no knowledge of such a covenant but what's happened is no doubt justified in terms of tactical logic. Otherwise I would not have been pulled away from the blockade front. The Regent sent in the Springer ships as well because he feared that my own 10,000 ships might not be enough. We did not know that the monsters from the other universe had already suffered so many casualties. Is there anything special you require, Terranian?"

Rhodan considered. He knew that the Springer patriarch Cokaze was listening in on the hyper channel. "I'd like you to inform Cokaze that Terra does not wish to be incorporated into the Springer community. We are an independent system and such we shall remain."

"I understand," said the Admiral discreetly. "I fully understand."

With that the communication was ended. But while the Arkonide fleet assembled itself near the Martian orbit to take up a waiting position, the 4000 Springer ships continued flying toward the Earth.

Rhodan put in a call to the clan chieftain and advised him in icy tones: "I'll give you 3 minutes to change course, Cokaze! Otherwise you'll see our teeth. I didn't ask for your assistance, so don't ask for your pay."

"We're traders and we don't take action for nothing."

"I didn't call you. If you bow to the Regent and follow his orders, that's not my fault. I'm still strong enough to teach you a lesson. My fleet forces are setting a course right now. You will turn away at once!"

For the present Rhodan could not know what Cokaze thought of it but in any case his ships went into deceleration and a short time later they joined up with the robot fleet.

Only about 60 battle-damaged fighting units received landing permission from Rhodan. Thus it was that Galactic Traders landed for the first time on Terranian soil where they were received by a silent and hostile-looking human personnel force.

Rhodan transferred over to the superbattleship *WELLINGTON* in order to continue his observation of the more welcome contingents of the visiting fleets. But the commanders of the Terranian Fleet were recipients of secret orders.

Rhodan concluded his briefing there as follows: "It's obvious that neither Admiral Senekho nor the Springers are informed concerning the change of the guard on Arkon 3. For the love of Heaven don't breathe a single

careless word or Atlan's position will be endangered. Our first concern here is to force the Springers to withdraw. In a few days the robot fleet will fly back to the blockade front – Atlan has guaranteed it. So only the Traders present a threat to us. You will open fire on them the moment any of them dares to fly toward Terra, Venus or Mars. Gentlemen, this is the hour of awakening! The hiding game is past. From today forward, everybody will know where to find us. Therefore it is necessary to adopt a different galactic policy. I am of the opinion that we will succeed with it. So keep your eyes open – and I thank you."

While the *DRUSUS* sped toward a transition point on its way to pick up the cruiser *CALIFORNIA*, which was waiting in the Druuf universe, Rhodan withdrew to his cabin.

Wait, he thought. All of you just wait. Up till now the Earth has not been asleep, nor shall it sleep tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. You shall come to know us yet, all of you out there . . . !

END

PUCKY made use of his telekinesis, for the first time taking an almost hostile stand against Rhodan. What it cost him could be judged only by someone who knew that Perry Rhodan was the mousebeaver's best friend and that Pucky almost worshipped him.

Rhodan's arm was flung to one side by Pucky's telekinetic power. The mousebeaver scrambled to a safe distance and there assumed a military posture.

"Administrator . . . Lt. Puck reporting back from self-appointed mission. In this action I have determined that your son has not gone to the Springer side out of malicious intent. The defected Lt. Thomas Cardif is convinced that you sent his mother to her death!"

"And no matter what happens now, Perry, even if you send me away, I have to ask a question: who is more to blame for what has happened, your son Thomas Cardif or you?"

"Perry, why is he named Cardif and not Rhodan?"

* * *

Mission Mousebeaver results, in the next episode, in —

Kurt Band's
PUCKY'S GREATEST HOUR